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PART II.

MONSIEUR LECOQ IN ACTION.

XVI.

SOME days had elapsed since Piédouche, after uselessly giving chase to M. Tolbiac, had met the Galoupiats and Cambremer, and talked with them in a manner that promised such interesting results. The bargain entered into between the ex-detective and the coal-dealers was scrupulously carried out on either side. Every evening they dined together at the Feu Eternel, and Piédouche regularly handed fifty francs to the coal-man, who so far brought no news of the servant. And, yet, Jean and Jeannette did not spare themselves. Each day found them in the Champs Elysées and the Bois de Boulogne ; but they had no more met the waiting-maid there than they had seen her at the station on the arrival of the evening trains.

Cambremer had given no signs of life, but Thursday was close at hand, with the interview which would bring the switchman and Father Vinet face to face. Piédouche knew very well what he was about when he gave Marthe's father an appointment on the Place du Château d'Eau, and he expected great results from the meeting he had arranged with his master. For it was his master who was to play the *rôle* of an agent for the recovery of unclaimed inheritances.

When he had assumed the personality of a nabob, M. Lecoq had quite foreseen that he might find himself obliged to play various other *rôles*. To show himself in another character, he required another abode than the Grand Hotel, and so on returning from London, Piédouche had rented in the Rue de la Roquette, up a court only inhabited by workmen, a small apartment, which he had furnished at slight expense. So Father Lecoq could here be Father Vinet, and give consultations without his neighbours troubling themselves to find out whether he had paid for a licence to practise his profession. But as he left the hotel as an Indian prince, it was necessary for him to change his costume on the way. Ingenious Piédouche had provided for this emergency. The same person who had furnished him with a cab to go to Boulogne, so that he might arrest Thérèse's unfortunate lover, this same obliging person, who was one of Pigache's near relatives, had engaged, on consideration of a good round sum, to place a luxurious equipage and a discreet coachman at the nabob's disposal every day. Thus, whenever Lecoq wished to appear in a new skin, his hired carriage served him as a dressing-room. He entered it in the Rue Scribe dressed in Oriental style, and he left it on the outer boulevard, not far from the Père Lachaise

cemetery, attired like a lawyer. He reassumed possession of the principality of Bahour and returned to the hotel in the same manner. Piédouche and the friend from whom he hired the carriage were alone in the secret of these strange changes.

The unfortunate father awaited Cambremer's visit with all the greater impatience as the coal-dealer's promenades might be often repeated without bringing about the desired result. Moreover, the days passed on, and M. Lecoq counted them sadly, for he knew that the respite assured to the condemned man by his appeal to the Cour de Cassation would not extend beyond a month. As regards M. Holtz, that is to say Tolbiac, matters had also progressed but slowly. This personage had again been to see the nabob to inform him that he was on the track of the major's heirs, and would soon bring some decisive information. But he did not enter into details, and Louis's father was still in the dark as to the object of the excursion which Tolbiac had made in disguise on the Orleans railway line. The old track-hunter could only draw incomplete conclusions from such facts as he was aware of. On studying Piédouche's report concerning what was said by the Auvergnats and Cambremer, he had been led to believe that he had been right in his previous suspicions, and that the crimes of the Rue de l'Arbalète were connected with the search for the major's heirs. He had been especially struck with the fact that the name of Lecomte figured among the probable heirs of the deceased O'Sullivan, and he was inclined to believe that Thérèse had some right to the immense fortune deposited at the Bank of Dublin.

But even if this presumption became certainty, Father Lecoq would not have been greatly enlightened by it. Not to lose his time altogether while waiting for the auxiliaries, who were unwittingly serving his designs by bringing new revelations to Piédouche or himself, the false nabob frequented Madame Disney's hospitable abode, and she continued to overwhelm him with kind attentions. He had even made one or two visits to this English-woman's intimate friend, the beautiful Herminie who said she was acquainted with all Arabella's secrets. If she possessed them, however, she knew how to keep them faithfully, for the Nabob of Bahour was able to learn but very little from her. She certainly let him understand that the fair Disney was by no means a great lady, and that she had not always been enthroned in a gilded drawing-room. She even added that Tolbiac's birth was by no means illustrious, and that the parchments which made him Lord of Tinchebray, were hardly genuine. But she was careful to confine herself to generalities, and offered no proofs in support of her statement. Thus, M. Lecoq gained nothing from the unpleasant task he had imposed upon himself in visiting this creature.

After these futile attempts, he had now only to prepare himself to receive the man who was to bring him the genealogical tree of the O'Sullivan family. On his side, Cambremer was very anxious to overcome the disquietude and irritation he had felt for several days. His conversation with Piédouche clung to his memory, and excited his imagination. The hope of fortune which the detective had vaguely held out to him, troubled him much more than it delighted him, for if he rejoiced at the thought that his dear little Marthe might become rich, on the other hand, he feared that this inheritance would expose her to great dangers. He said to himself that others might dispute it—that perhaps there were people who plotted the poor child's ruin, and he even suspected that invisible enemies already prowled around her. On the day of his chat with Piédouche, an

unknown woman had tried to abduct the little one, who, fortunately, was too intelligent to allow herself to be led away. This attempt had not been renewed, but Marthe had told her father that two or three times in the evening, on returning from school, she had noticed a man following her. "A man in a blouse, with a long beard and a big stick," said Marthe; a man whose face had made her afraid. He had not spoken to her, but he had looked at her with such wicked eyes that she had run away as fast as her legs could carry her. Without running after her, this fellow had followed her at a distance, and had stayed a long time in front of the house where Cambremer lived—a large house mainly tenanted by workmen, and standing at the corner of the Boulevard de l'Hôpital and the Rue Poliveau.

Since his daughter had told him this story the switchman had felt uneasy, and had taken precautions against future adventures of the kind. Detained by his duties, he could not always accompany the little one, but he had begged of the nuns who kept the school which Marthe attended, not to let her go home alone, and he had also bidden the little one not to leave the other children on the way. His lodgings were on the ground floor, at the end of a yard, next door to the establishment of a laundress, a worthy woman, who had promised to watch over the little girl, as well as she was able, while the father was away. Cambremer did not dare to take Marthe too often on the railway line, where she had so barely escaped being crushed one evening, and as he could but seldom leave his switch, he was obliged to intrust what he held dearest in the world, to a neighbour's care. Life is thus with poor people, who are obliged to earn their daily bread by manual labour.

The vague fears he entertained had contributed to prevent him from following Piédouche's advice to visit this Madame Lecomte, who bore the name of one of the major's heirs. It was a question of journeying to Boulogne, and he could only get away after his work was finished. It would be a whole evening he must spend away from Marthe, and the necessities of the service but too often obliged him to leave her alone at home.

However, on the evening preceding the Thursday when he was to meet Piédouche on the Place du Château d'Eau, it happened that Marthe, somewhat tired from having played too much, asked to go to bed earlier than usual. Her father let her get to sleep, begged the neighbour not to absent herself until he returned, and then hastened to the Port d'Austerlitz to take the Suresnes boat. He calculated that he would reach Boulogne by eight o'clock, and could return home by ten. It happened that he was master of his time till the next morning, and he wished to profit by his liberty, to make this visit which he had so far deferred.

While Pierre Cambremer was following the course of the Seine to ask Madame Lecomte, whom he had never seen, for some information respecting her husband's family, Thérèse and her mother, seated in their drawing-room, where they had seen Louis Lecoq for the last time, gazed sadly upon the river flowing below the height of Saint Cloud. Nature had a festive look. The sun had just disappeared behind the tall chestnut trees which were in full bloom, and after the brightness of a warm spring day the softened light of evening followed. The sky was blue, of that pale blue which does not dazzle the eyes like the pitiless azure of southern heavens. The fresh verdure of May adorned the grand woods which covered the hill side. The birds twittered under the foliage, and the May-flies darted through the air glistening like particles of gold. The branches waved in the breeze, the air was impregnated with floral perfume, and the joyous

singing of bargemen ascended to the room where the young girl sat mourning for her betrothed.

"Do you remember the day, mother," she said, "do you remember the day on which we lost him, how we spent long hours at this same window? The weather was gloomy, the earth in mourning and the landscape saddened by winter, and yet it appeared radiant to me. My happiness illuminated it. But now it seems as though there were a veil between my eyes and this splendid scene. I recall everything and fear I shall die."

Madame Lecomte took hold of her daughter's hands and drew her to her heart. "Why won't you go away?" she murmured; "why do you refuse to leave this house, which unceasingly recalls to you such a sorrowful past?"

"You know very well, mother, that I have vowed to myself to stay here until I am no longer allowed to hope."

"And what, then, can you hope for?" asked her mother, bitterly. "Do you not know that it is all over?"

"No, for he lives—and God will not allow him to die—he is innocent."

"Alas! he is condemned, and even those who defended him have abandoned him."

"Not all."

"His father believes him guilty, since he has given up all attempts to save him."

"No," said Thérèse, quickly. And as her mother looked at her with an air of astonishment, she continued: "I am sure that he is active, and that if he hides himself it is in view of the more surely attaining his object."

Thérèse had never disclosed the secret assurance which had come to her in such a mysterious way as she left the witness-room after the sentence had been pronounced. She did not wish to betray this secret even now, and she feared that she had already said too much. The banker's widow did not share her daughter's illusions, and, to tell the truth, she was grieved to see her persist in what she considered to be purely chimerical hopes. Although she had considerable sympathy for the young man who was to have been her son-in-law, she looked the situation in the face with more *sang froid* than Thérèse. She understood very well that Louis was lost, whatever might befall him. A reprieve would not restore him his honour, for public opinion is implacable, and does not forgive those whom justice has touched. Besides, even mercy meant imprisonment for life, and it would perhaps be better that his head should fall. With him dead, forgetfulness would sooner cover this dreadful history, and Thérèse would not be a convict's betrothed. And then, Madame Lecomte did not believe in the innocence of the condemned man. She had long doubted, for she lacked the faith which love inspires, and had at last succumbed to the weight of evidence. The facts strongly accused Louis Lecoq, and everybody was against him; and she failed to resist the common impulse. Besides her feelings had been greatly hurt. She was not only indignant with the son for having compromised Thérèse, but she was indignant with the father for having passed himself off as a retired merchant when he was only an ex-detective. Madame Lecomte had not been present at the trial, but she had read the details of the case in the newspapers, and respecting the elder Lecoq she was of the same opinion as the public prosecutor, who had imputed the abduction of the deaf-mute to the veteran detective. Moreover, she did not at all believe that he was working in the shade to save Louis, who was fated, according to her mind, to end as assassins usually end. Her good sense told her that in the cruel situation in which she and her daughter found themselves, the only thing they could do was

to make a long, a very long journey, and only to return to France after time had allowed the affair to be forgotten.

Unfortunately, on this point, Thérèse would listen to nothing. She had refused to listen to the advice of the oldest friends of her family, and absolutely rejected the proposals which Madame Lecomte did not cease to urge. This dissent between the mother and daughter had ended in bringing about a certain restraint between them. As soon as the conversation turned upon the lamentable affair which estranged them, Thérèse either changed the subject or let the matter drop. She would often even leave her mother and take refuge in solitude.

On that evening, however, it was Madame Lecomte who ended the painful conversation. She rose, kissed Thérèse on the forehead, and said to her sadly : "I am going to pray to God, to ask Him to keep you from despair, and to inspire you with wise resolutions."

The young girl remained silent, and, on finding herself alone, she went and leaned on the balcony where she had often exchanged tender confidences with Louis. Her eyes, moist with tears, gazed over the park of Saint Cloud, and she sought for a spot on the bank of the Seine where, one night during the siege of Paris, Louis had gone alone to make a perilous reconnaissance ; a spot he had pointed out to her in the time when they were so happy.

Suddenly a sound of voices reached her ear, and at the gate which opened upon the quay she saw Antoine, the oldest servant of the house, parleying with a man dressed like a workman in his Sunday clothes. The colloquy did not last long. The old servant had orders to admit no one to see the ladies, and he carried out the order most scrupulously. He abruptly closed the gate in the face of the stranger, who went away apparently very much disappointed.

This insignificant scene recalled a sad reminiscence to Thérèse. This servant was the same one who, much against his will, had introduced the disguised detective officer who had come to arrest M. Lecoq de Gentilly. Since that fatal day, Thérèse had avoided meeting him, and especially speaking to him. She appreciated the good qualities of this faithful, devoted valet, but she was not mistress of her feelings, and she could hardly bear the sight of old Antoine's honest face.

On seeing him talking with an individual modestly dressed, the idea came to her that the stranger's visit was perhaps connected with her unfortunate lover's affair. It was assuredly a hazardous conjecture, but in her excited condition the young girl attached an exaggerated importance to the most trifling events. It seemed to her that Louis's father could not leave her always without news of the task he had undertaken, and that a message would arrive from him at a moment when she least expected it. She said to herself that perhaps Antoine had driven this messenger away, for naturally he had been unwilling to explain to a valet why he wished to talk with Mademoiselle Lecomte. And thereupon, without further reflection, she precipitately left the drawing-room.

She expected to meet Antoine in the anteroom or on the stairs, but not seeing him there, she went down the front steps and found the gardener, who told her that Antoine had just gone to Saint Cloud, to take a letter to the post-office. Thérèse resolved to await his return walking about the garden. The day was at its close, and the evening star already glittered in the sky. It was a propitious moment for reverie, the hour when those who love confess it in whispers, or when those who have loved evoke the

recollection of vanished happiness. Thus pondering, the condemned man's betrothed, giving way to the melancholy charm of the darkness and silence which surrounded her, followed a winding walk with thick clumps of evergreens on either side and ending at a gate which opened into the fields.

XVII.

THE villa which M. Lecomte had built, and where his widow resided since his death, looked towards the Seine, which was here bordered by a broad quay. A courtyard with parterres of rare flowers extended in front of the house, which communicated on both sides with a large garden carefully kept. Beyond the lawns and shrubbery extended a real wood, a wood of tall trees covering several acres. The banker was very rich, and land had been cheap at the time he bought it, so that he had been able to secure, at the very doors of Paris, the luxury of an estate which was almost as vast as a seigniorial domain of other days. And he had also had the good taste not to touch the wood, to respect the old trees and mossy glades, and allow the wild briars to grow at will. He had confined himself to cutting walks through the underwood, placing seats in favourable positions, and surrounding his park with a railing to protect it from the incursions of passers-by.

This railing, overgrown with ivy, mingled with the foliage, and protected the inmates from the gaze of inquisitive folks. It was bordered beyond by a branch road which led from the river to the Longchamps race-course. This road, but little frequented, traversed some waste land where the laundresses of Boulogne hung their linen to dry, and where the vagabonds of the suburbs willingly came to sleep in the sunlight. The occupants of the villa seldom ventured there, but they could use this road for the wood had several gates at convenient distances, and it sometimes happened that the servants went that way in view of more speedily reaching Boulogne. The route that Thérèse Lecomte followed, at first extended beneath a vault of foliage, formed by tall beech trees, which twined their branches thirty feet above the ground ; it then dwindled into a narrow foot-path, and passed through a coppice of wild undergrowth, and then wound round beside a thick hedge, with the briars and ivy entwined in the fence. It was a kind of circuitous road which made a tour of the park. Thérèse liked to follow it, for she had often walked there with her betrothed in the beautiful winter days when the pale January sun glistened on the icicles suspended by the frost upon the branches of the trees.

The woods had now adorned themselves in their spring beauty, but the young girl's heart had not changed, and each steps he took awakened sad thoughts. She walked on with her eyes cast down, with a thoughtful expression on her brow, heedlessly treading the mossy path, and starting at times whenever a redbreast flew up from a bush touched by her white skirt. Daylight was rapidly giving place to night ; under the beech trees it was already dark, but the dimness did not frighten Thérèse. Her thoughts travelled far away from this park where Louis had for the first time told her that he loved her. She thought of the prison where the condemned man now spent his last hours, of the gloomy cell, and of the jailers so callously indifferent to the sufferings of the unfortunate beings whom they keep till the executioner arrives to claim them. She heard the clicking of the keys and the grating of the bolts, and she began to curse the

justice of men, and to doubt the justice of God. Thus lost in thought, she reached the point where the footpath began to skirt the ivy-covered railing. She came again into the uncertain twilight, and stopped to look at the sky, which little by little was changing in colour, while the stars shone forth one after another like flowers which the night had called into bloom. There was one star which she had often contemplated with Louis, a little one lost in a corner of space. They had chosen it because it twinkled far away from the transcendent constellations overhead, and because it seemed to them that they themselves had discovered it, and that it belonged to them alone. It still shone as brightly as ever, and Thérèse imagined that it smiled upon her. Then she reflected that they had vowed to raise their eyes towards this celestial diamond each time that they found themselves separated from each other, and that this time Louis was unable to see it from his dungeon.

A slight noise aroused her from her reverie. Some one was walking cautiously along the road beyond, and on looking through the ivy on the railing, she saw a man crouching against it on the other side. She was not timid, and so she thought that this man was merely an inquisitive villager who amused himself by watching the ladies of the villa. This often occurred, and she gave the matter but little thought. Nevertheless, she quickened her pace to see if the inquisitive fellow would follow her, but it seemed to her that he did not stir.

She soon reached a bench at the foot of an old oak, directly opposite one of the gates in the fence ; a bench where she had often sat with her hapless lover. At the thought she determined to rest there once more, and strangely enough, as soon as she had taken her seat, she remembered the visitor who had been refused admittance by Antoine. "Who knows but what he was sent to me by Louis's father?" she murmured. "Who knows but what it is he who is prowling around the park, seeking for an opportunity to speak with me?"

She listened, but she heard nothing, and said to herself that she was mistaken. It was not yet quite night, and was sufficiently light for her to see that no one was on the road. Thérèse then thought that if she delayed her return to the house any longer, her mother might be worried, and she was about to rise, when a stone, thrown over the gate, fell at her feet. This stone was enveloped in a piece of paper. The young girl did not hesitate to pick it up and unfold the paper. It bore these words, written in large letters. "If you wish for news of Louis, come. You are awaited on the road."

She read it and darted towards the gate. She did not reflect that there might be danger in venturing outside of the enclosure on the faith of an anonymous message. She believed in presentiments, and since she had seen a man parleying with Antoine, something had told her that he came on the part of Louis's father. Besides, by this hypothesis, everything was readily explained. The messenger, repulsed by the valet, had made a tour of the premises. It was he who had shown himself through the ivy. He had seen the young girl, and guessed that it was she whom he had to deal with, and so, not daring to call her by her name, he had thrown her a note.

Thérèse knew that the key of this gate was deposited in a hiding-place, in one of the columns connecting the railing. She found it there, inserted it in the lock, opened the gate, and at once advanced on to the road. She looked to the left, in the direction where she had seen the man, but no one was in sight. The drooping branches of the trees extended over the rail-

ing, and in the shadow they cast it was quite dark. To the right, on the contrary, there were only some shrubs, which cast no shade, and in the dim twilight, Thérèse distinguished two individuals who were evidently trying to hide themselves by drawing up close against the railing. It seemed to her that a little farther off she could see a black mass, which might be a vehicle. Then only did she remember that she was alone, that the spot was unfrequented, and that if she were here attacked her cries would not be heard, for the villa was some distance off. So out of prudence, she retreated close to the partly opened gate, so as to be able, in case of need, to take refuge behind the protecting railing.

One of the two individuals left his companion and came towards her. The young girl had the courage to await him. He drew near, walking close along beside the fence, and when he was two steps off she saw that he in no wise resembled the man who had been sent away by Antoine. She was about to retreat when the stranger said to her, in a low voice : "His father wishes to speak with you."

"His father," rejoined Mademoiselle Lecomte. "Ah, I knew well enough that he had not abandoned us. Where is he?"

"Two steps from here, in that vehicle by the side of the road. He doesn't dare show himself, for the police are looking for him as you know. He can only have but a short interview with you, and won't get out. But he wishes to ask you for some information of the greatest importance."

"Conduct me, sir," said Thérèse.

The man at once took the lead, and Mademoiselle Lecomte followed him.

He kept close to the fence, and at a few steps from the gate he passed very near his comrade, who had remained as motionless as a statue. Thérèse also passed by, but without looking at this strange sentinel.

All at once she felt two arms clasp her from behind. At the same time the man who preceded her turned quickly round, and applied his handkerchief to her mouth. Resistance was impossible. She could only cry out, in a muffled voice : "Help ! help !"

XVIII.

THÉRÈSE was unable to repeat this cry of distress, this appeal of despair, for the handkerchief closed her mouth, and the arms which had seized her raised her from the ground. The vehicle towards which she was being carried stood ten paces off. The driver was on his seat, ready to whip up his horses as soon as the abduction was consummated. Night had entirely set in, and no one appeared on the road. Nevertheless, the young girl's cry had been heard. A man, the one whom she had seen through the ivy, suddenly emerged from the shade in which he had kept himself hidden while Mademoiselle Lecomte conversed with M. Lecoq's pretended messenger. In three leaps he had reached the abductors, and he fell upon them with herculean strength. The villains had not anticipated an attack from behind, and the new comer did all that was necessary to deliver the poor child whom they were taking away. The one who held her round the body received a thump on the skull, and rolled on to the ground; the other, who was tapped on the shoulder, also let go, and ran off as fast as he could go, without troubling himself about his comrade, who lay extended on the ground.

Thérèse's liberator gave them no further thought. He rid the young girl of the gag they had applied to her mouth, and was about to take her in his arms to carry her beyond danger, when he perceived that she had not lost her consciousness, but was able to walk. She even recovered her speech, and said to him, in broken sentences :

"Thanks, monsieur—don't leave me, I beg of you—the park gate is open—we shall be safe behind the railing."

"Come then, mademoiselle, and don't be afraid," replied the man. "Lean on me."

Thérèse did as he told her, and the assailants made no further demonstrations. One of them had good reason for being quiet, for he had been killed, or nearly so, and the other had already got into the vehicle which was rolling rapidly away in the direction of Paris. The young girl and her defender found the gate open, and passed into the park, the man hastening to turn the key and remove it, as it could have been reached from outside by anyone passing his hand between the railings.

Thérèse, brave though she was, was too much overcome to go far. She let herself fall upon the bench where she had been seated when the perfidious message was thrown to her over the gate. The stranger remained standing in front of her, and waited in respectful attitude for her to speak to him. Mademoiselle Lecomte could not see his features, for it was dark, but from his height and bearing she thought she recognised in him the visitor who had rung at the entrance to the villa.

Perhaps he surmised that she awaited an explanation from him, for he said to her gently : "I am greatly pleased, mademoiselle, to have had the idea of following you on the other side of the fence. Misfortune is good for something, for if your servant had allowed me to enter just now, I should not have been here when those scamps assaulted you."

"It was you, then, whom I saw from my window—"

"Yes, mademoiselle. I saw you too; and a moment later, as I was walking along the road which skirts the garden, I saw you under the trees."

"I had come down to tell an old servant to let you in ; but when I reached the yard you were already at a distance, and Antoine had gone out. You no doubt wish to speak with my mother?"

"I wish to speak with Madame Lecomte."

"I am her daughter."

"The daughter of Madame Lecomte, widow of M. Lecomte, who was a banker in Paris?"

"You are on her property, sir ; she will be pleased to receive you, and if you will follow me—"

"I thank you, mademoiselle ; but it seems to me that you have not yet recovered from the emotion which you must have experienced. If you will allow me, I will accompany you to the house, and will postpone my visit to Madame Lecomte till another day."

"Why? This visit had no doubt an object of some importance. You must be anxious to see my mother, and I will conduct you to her. Oh, do not be afraid. I can walk very well," she added on rising.

"I admire your courage, mademoiselle, and I think it is as well for me to accompany you to the house. The men who assailed you have only to scale the fence—and, besides, the place where you are is not secure—they could waylay you on the road and fire at you."

"You are right, monsieur, let us go," said Thérèse. And she took the footpath she had previously followed, walking by the side of her deliverer,

who seemed quite embarrassed by the situation in which chance had thrown him.

Mademoiselle Lecomte was not less embarrassed than he was but from quite different reasons ; more embarrassed than affected, for the peril she had just encountered had not made her lose her self-possession for a moment. But she saw this strange adventure under a peculiar aspect. She did not doubt but what the snare into which she had so nearly fallen, had been set by Louis's enemies, and she was, perhaps, not wrong in this, since they had made use of his name to lure her into the ambush. But she was more than ever convinced that her protector, who had so opportunely fallen to her from the skies, had been sent to her by Louis's father, and she thought a great deal more of asking him what news he brought her than of reflecting anent the villains he had put to flight.

Her protector, however, was thinking of the consequences of the battle he had been engaged in, and on the way to the villa he said to the young girl : "I think it will be as well to send one of your servants at once to pick up the brigand who was left on the field. I hope I didn't kill him—but I may have been so unfortunate ; and, in that case, I should want to produce witnesses who could tell how it happened ; besides if he is wounded, he cannot be left without help—"

"Monsieur," interrupted Thérèse, in a firm voice, "I owe you my life, but I have a favour to ask of you : I beg of you never to mention what has just happened—to anyone, not even to my mother."

"But, mademoiselle, suppose a man has been killed ?"

"You will have nothing to reproach yourself with, for it was to protect me against the scoundrel's violence that you struck him that blow. And if you are reproached for what you have done, I shall be there to defend you. But you know very well that those who attacked me are the same who have caused Louis's condemnation."

"Louis?" repeated the man, who seemed quite dumbfounded.

"Yes : his father must have told you—for I am sure it is his father who sends you."

"Excuse me, mademoiselle, but I don't understand you. I don't know at all whom you are speaking of !"

"What ! you don't come on his behalf ? You are not sent by—"

Thérèse did not complete her sentence, for at the end of the footpath she had just noticed a lighted lantern, and could hear her mother's voice. Madame Lecomte, troubled by the young girl's prolonged absence, was coming to look for her, escorted by Antoine.

"I see that I am mistaken," said Thérèse hastily, "but I again beg of you to be silent respecting what has passed, and not to deny what I am about to say."

Her deliverer made no rejoinder, but silence is consent ; and so when Thérèse met her mother, she did not hesitate to say : "I have greatly distressed you, have I not, mother ? But you will forgive me, for I bring you a gentleman who has something important to inform you of."

The tableau presented by these four persons assembled by the light of a lantern under a vault of foliage was a curious one, and their appearance would have made a good subject for an artist. The anonymous visitor twisted his hat, which he had taken off in saluting Madame Lecomte. The latter, shocked and stupefied to meet her daughter in the company of a stranger, looked alternately from one to the other not knowing which of the two to ask for an explanation. On his side Antoine, still more astounded

than his mistress, stared at the man whom he had refused admittance. Thérèse alone was calm and almost smiling. "It is Antoine's fault," she continued, in the most natural tone. "He would not admit this gentleman, who asked to speak to you, and who, while going away, saw me through the railing as I was strolling in the park. He addressed himself to me. I opened the gate for him, and here we are. Shall we go up into the drawing-room?"

The banker's widow had a great many objections to make to this discourse and this proposal, but on reflection she judged it wiser to say nothing, and to submit to the singular visit imposed upon her by Thérèse.

XIX.

"COME, monsieur," said Madame Lecomte, taking her daughter's arm, and making a sign to her servant to walk ahead so as to light the road with his lantern.

The stranger followed without having to be begged, but he walked along with bowed head and an appearance of discomfiture. He had evidently not anticipated such an ending to this very unexpected adventure, and if he did not regret having gone to the girl's rescue, he was perhaps sorry to find himself mixed up in a seemingly incomprehensible mystery.

Madame Lecomte was also troubled, for her daughter's conduct seemed to her inexplicable, and she was anxious to terminate what she considered a most improper situation. They quickly reached the house and went into the very room which had witnessed the scene preceding Louis Lecoq's arrest. The old servant had not forgotten that scene, and he instinctively mistrusted people who asked to talk to his mistress and refused to give their names. He would have liked to have stationed himself in a corner, so as to come to Madame Lecomte's assistance in case of need, and also to hear what this man had to say. But Thérèse requested him to leave, and he was obliged to content himself with remaining in the anteroom, as he had done on the occasion of Piédoch's visit.

At the invitation of the lady of the house, the stranger had taken a seat on the extreme edge of a chair, and was plainly asking himself how he should begin. "Whom have I the honour to speak with?" asked the widow, in a scarcely encouraging tone.

"Dear me! madame," stammered Therèse's deliverer, "my name is unknown to you, and you may perhaps be astonished that I have taken the liberty to call at your house, for I am only a workman. My name is Pierre Cambremer, and I am a switchman on the Orleans railway line."

"Then, monsieur," continued Madame Lecomte, "will you please to tell me to what circumstance I owe your visit?"

Cambremer moved uneasily on his chair and remained for several seconds without answering. He was trying to devise an exordium to his discourse and could find none. Finally, however, he resolved to abandon preliminaries and go straight to the point. "Madame," he said, "you will no doubt think me impertinent, but I have come to request some information from you. I wish to know who was the mother of M. Lecomte, your husband?"

"This is a joke, I suppose," exclaimed the widow, who was greatly displeased.

The switchman had made a bungling commencement; he might certainly

have chosen a happier way of explaining his object. He quickly understood that he was on the wrong track, and so he gave another turn to the question he wished an answer to. "I swear to you, madame," he continued, "that something very serious is in question. Believe me, it is not curiosity which prompts me to ask you if your mother-in-law's maiden name was not Georgiana O'Sullivan."

Madame Lecomte's face expressed some little astonishment, and Thérèse, who had not appeared particularly interested in the conversation, now became attentive. "And supposing such was the case, monsieur," said the widow, coldly, "how could that interest you?"

"I will tell you, madame," replied Cambremer, who began to recover his composure. Several years ago I married a woman, whom I had the misfortune to lose, and who has left me a little daughter, six years old, who is my only consolation. My wife was a poor working girl, and her mother was no richer than she, but her grandmother belonged to a good Irish family named O'Sullivan."

"There are a great many O'Sullivans in Ireland," interrupted Madame Lecomte.

"So I was told, and I should never have taken the trouble to investigate my wife's parentage if I had not been advised to do so on behalf of my daughter. Quite recently, among some old papers left by my mother-in-law, I found an inventory—a list of all the persons of her family—and I saw there that an aunt of my mother-in-law had married in 1819 a M. Joseph Lecomte, who was then employed by a stockbroker."

"My grandfather's name was Joseph, and he was a broker's clerk when he was married," exclaimed Thérèse. "My father often told me so."

The widow was less hasty in admitting that her deceased husband came of the same race as the daughter of this labourer, whom she had never heard of in her life. Nevertheless, she knew perfectly well that the late Lecomte was the son of a broker's clerk, and an Irish governess, named O'Sullivan. But she suspected the man who was talking to her of wishing to speculate on this relationship, and she determined to hold herself in reserve and await the development of his story. "My wife's grandmother's name was Elizabeth," continued Cambremer, "her great-aunt, who became Madame Lecomte, was named Georgiana."

"That was certainly my grandmother's name," said Thérèse. "You have told me a hundred times, mother, that at my birth there was some talk of naming me Georgiana, in memory of her."

"Then, mademoiselle," said the switchman, timidly, "I was not mistaken, and my little Marthe turns out to be your cousin. Oh, don't be afraid, madame," he added, on seeing that Madame Lecomte's face darkened, "I have no intention of asking you to recognise her as a relative. I know very well that we don't belong to the same class of society, and that I can't visit you. Don't think, either, that I have come to ask your help or protection. I earn my living, thank heavens, and have no need of assistance from any one."

"Will you, then, monsieur," said the widow, who was considerably appeased by this declaration, "will you then explain to me what you expect from me?"

"Nothing, madame. I was anxious to inform myself, because it might happen that my daughter would be called upon to receive an inheritance through her connection with the O'Sullivan's, and because in that case, mademoiselle would also have some claim to a share in the property. It is

a mere conjecture, but if it were realized, I should at once notify you so that you might claim your share."

This time Madame Lecomte, touched by so much disinterestedness, no longer tried to entrench herself behind evasive answers. "Excuse me, monsieur," she said, "I was not prepared for the news you have brought me, and I avoided, I admit, answering you frankly. Now that I know whom I have to deal with, I can tell you that M. Lecomte, my lamented husband, was, in point of fact, the son of Mademoiselle Georgiana O'Sullivan. He scarcely knew his mother, who died three years after her marriage, and he was always ignorant of what had become of his relations on his mother's side. He merely knew that Mademoiselle O'Sullivan, the daughter of an Irishman owning a small property, had come to France when very young; that she possessed no fortune, and had a brother and three sisters. The whole family became dispersed at the death of the father, as often happens in France among those who are poor. My husband undertook a search, which was fruitless, and to-day, for the first time, I hear speak of a person of his race. You have no doubt proofs establishing this relationship?"

"I have the list I have spoken of, and some certificates; if the ones concerning your branch of the family are not there, madame, at all events the list indicates the places and dates of the births and marriages in the family, so it would be easy to procure the necessary documents."

"Quite so—and I beg of you to believe, monsieur, that neither my daughter nor myself will blush to acknowledge the ties which unite us to your child."

"You will bring her to see us, will you not?" asked Thérèse, looking at Cambremer, kindly.

"But I fear," continued the widow, "that nothing will come to her from her mother's family, for I repeat to you, monsieur, the O'Sullivan family were very poor."

"I know that, madame; my mother-in-law was reduced to a life of toil, and I should never have thought of an inheritance falling to my daughter, only one day last winter a man whom I had never seen before came and talked to me vaguely about her being entitled to something. However, I hardly listened to him, and he went away and has not returned. I had almost forgotten his visit, although I had good reason to remember it, for my little Marthe, through his fault, barely escaped being crushed by a locomotive. But the papers I found a few days ago have led me to think that his visit had some real object. Some one advised me to come and see you, in the first place, and then to show my papers to an agent who has been recommended to me as being very expert in such cases."

"It is singular," muttered Thérèse. "A man came, you say, last winter? You don't remember when it was?"

"I could not give the exact date," replied Cambremer, "but I am sure that it was two or three days after an event which created a great excitement in my neighbourhood—the murder in the Rue de l'Arbalète."

XX.

CAMBREMER at once saw the effect he had produced by recalling the crime in the Rue de l'Arbalète. Thérèse became extremely pale and pressed her hand to her heart, while Madame Lecomte hid her face in her handkerchief. The poor fellow, quite out of countenance, asked himself what he could have

done to trouble them, and not knowing what to say to repair his involuntary fault, he was already thinking of leaving, when the young girl, raising her head and conquering her emotion, asked him : "What was this man like?"

"Why! mademoiselle," stammered the switchman, "there was nothing peculiar about him. He was well dressed, and might be from forty to fifty years of age. His features expressed nothing, except his eyes—grey eyes which didn't look you in the face."

"It is he."

"What do you mean, my dear child?" asked the widow, who failed to understand what Thérèse was thinking about.

"You don't remember, then, mother, that one day, during the month of January, a man called here, asked to speak with you, and refused to give Antoine his name, so that you begged Louis to receive him?"

"In fact, I do seem to recollect that, but—"

"Louis could only get vague replies from him, and came back very much excited after having dismissed him. He told us that the man seemed to him to have some bad intentions—he thought he had had to deal with an enemy—with a spy perhaps. And the picture he drew of him agrees exactly with the description given by this gentleman."

"What connection do you see between that visit and the one received by monsieur?" asked Madame Lecomte.

Thérèse was silent. She wished to share her thoughts with no one, and considered she would act prudently in keeping them to herself; still she imagined that a vast plot had been set on foot by the persecutors of Louis Lecoq, and that the attack upon herself was even a part of it.

"Mademoiselle," said Cambremer, who did not understand any better than Madame Lecomte what the young girl had in view, "I must tell you that this man never returned. Chance, however, procured me his address, and I went several times to his residence, but never succeeded in seeing him."

"What is his name?" asked Madame Lecomte, quickly.

"Tolbiac de Tinchebray. He lives in the Rue Godot-de-Mauroy."

"I shall remember that," murmured Thérèse.

"My dear child," said the widow, who wished to terminate this interview, "the facts you recall do not interest monsieur, and I should blame myself if I were to detain him any longer."

The switchman understood the meaning of this, and rising to his feet he said : "I thank you, madame, for your kindness, and I beg of you once more to excuse my intrusion. I have only now to ask you if you will authorise me to say to my agent that mademoiselle descends from an O'Sullivan?"

"Not only do I authorise you, monsieur, but I beg of you to do so, and I shall be even greatly obliged to you if you will acquaint me with the result of your interview with him."

"I shall not fail to do so, madame. I expect to see him to-morrow evening."

"And the day after to-morrow I hope that you will introduce me to my little cousin," said Thérèse, while offering Cambremer her tiny hand, which he only dared to touch with the tips of his fingers.

The widow showed herself less cordial. She had not yet altogether recovered from the first impression of the switchman's strange visit, and she considered that Thérèse went too far and too fast.

Cambremer took his leave, and was escorted to the gate by Antoine, who considered it was his duty to watch him closely. On finding himself alone on the quay, Marthe's father recovered his self-possession, which he had somewhat lost during the past hour. He began to reflect on the strange and unforeseen incidents which had occurred during his trip to Boulogne. The most serious of them was assuredly the battle he had engaged in with Thérèse's assailants, a battle which had stretched one of the abductors on the ground. Cambremer certainly did not regret having gone to the young girl's rescue, but he could not understand her conduct after the event, any more than he could explain the cause of this brutal attack upon her. Who could harbour malice against this young girl, so gentle and so loving? Why was she anxious for her mother to be kept ignorant of this adventure? And, above all, how did it happen that she, who seemed so good, thought so little about the man who was left lying in the road?

Cambremer did not know that Thérèse considered she had had to deal with the enemies, persecutors, and executioners of Louis Lecoq, and that her heart, usually so sympathetic with all sorrows, had for this reason no pity. The switchman, not having the same reasons for being implacable, regretted having struck so hard, and was not without apprehensions as to the consequences of the affair. Whatever it might cost him, at the risk of being assailed by the villains, or surprised by some passers-by leaning over a corpse, he resolved to go and see what had become of the man whom he had felled to the ground.

So for the second time he took the road which skirted the park railing and sought for the place where the engagement had taken place. He had some trouble in finding it, and took some precautions in approaching, for the night was dark and the road favourable for ambuscades. However, he finally recognised the gate which he had passed through with Mademoiselle Lecomte, and, a little farther on, the grassy slope on which the man had fallen. But, in spite of a thorough search, extending for some distance around, he failed to find his vanquished foe. One of two things had happened: either the rogue who had fallen had only been stunned and had regained his feet and taken flight, or else his accomplice, who had at first gone away in the vehicle, had thought it imprudent to leave his comrade lying there, and so had returned and taken him away. In either case, it was pretty certain that the parties would make no complaint, and would probably never be heard of again.

This was all that Cambremer wanted, for he did not consider it his duty to go in pursuit. He even refrained from proceeding along the road they had taken, and, retracing his steps, he repaired to the bridge of Saint Cloud, to await the tramway which took him back to Paris.

He did not lack subjects to reflect upon; and on the whole he had no reason to be discontented, for he had just acquired proof that Marthe's genealogy was *bona fide*; and yet the journey seemed long to him. He was in a hurry to see his little one, and reproached himself for having left her so long alone. The remembrance of the suspicious persons who had prowled around her for several days past returned to his mind, and he connected this remembrance with the attempt he had been instrumental in averting. This attempt against Mademoiselle Lecomte was very much like an abduction, and he recollects that only a few days before, on the quay before the Jardin des Plantes, a strange woman had tried to lead Marthe away. "It might be thought there are folks harbouring designs against all who have the O'Sullivan blood in their veins," he muttered shuddering. And he cursed

the horses of the tramway, which did not go fast enough to please him.

His impatience finally became so great, that on reaching the Place de la Concord, he alighted from the vehicle and took a cab to the Boulevard de l'Hôpital. This costly locomotion was altogether contrary to his usual course, for he habitually economized as much as possible, so as to put something aside for Marthe. But on this occasion, he only thought of embracing her as soon as possible. However, he was not worried, for he had confided her to his neighbour, the laundress, who was a kind and trustworthy woman. Besides, Marthe was, no doubt, sleeping the deep sleep of childhood, and her father hoped that she would not have perceived his absence. When the cab stopped before the modest looking house at the corner of the boulevard and the Rue Poliveau, Cambremer saw that the door was open, and that a light was burning at the further end of the yard where he occupied a small apartment on the ground floor. "Good!" he thought, as he paid the driver, "Madame Sorbier's women are still at work. There is no danger."

In fact, they were still up at the laundress's, for he could hear a woman's voice saying: "Bless me! a cab! It's he perhaps, whom they are bringing back!"

XXI.

It was quite an event for a cab to stop at the door of this house, which was inhabited by poor people who never left or returned except on foot, and so Cambremer was not astonished to hear a kind of hubbub at the end of the yard, with the sound of hurrying feet and whispering women in the passage. Neither did he pay much attention to the exclamation which had reached his ears, nor did not stop to ask himself whom the women were talking about, when they said: "It's he they are bringing back."

He finished paying his driver, who whipped up his horse and went off grumbling about the long distance he had had to come with this citizen, who lived in such an out-of-the-way place. Then, happy at the thought that he was going to embrace Marthe, Cambremer turned round and approached the door of the house. As he did so, he found himself face to face with two young girls who fled off, crying out as though they had seen a ghost.

Cambremer, stupefied by this reception, followed them and quickly reached the yard, where he found all the old gossips of the house assembled together, and where his apparition produced the same effect as at the doorway. For several seconds there was an indescribable uproar. All the women talked at the same time, and congregated round the switchman. At last his neighbour, the laundress, detached herself from the group, and addressed Marthe's father in these words: "Ah, and so it was a farce?"

"How a farce?" asked Cambremer, astounded.

"Well, now, truly, this isn't right; and I shouldn't have believed that a man like you would have amused himself by frightening us in that way, merely to say to us afterwards: 'It was only for fun.'"

"Explain yourself, Mother Sorbier. I swear I don't in the least understand what you are saying to me."

"Come, come, this has been going on long enough. It isn't worth while to keep it up any longer."

"Ah, but you vex me, finally, and if you don't answer me plainly, I—"

"Don't you get angry into the bargain—that *would* be funny. Look here, Cambremer, you ought to be ashamed to amuse yourself with such foolishness—to frighten your little one in that way; no, truly, it isn't right—she nearly died from the blow—"

"Died!" repeated Cambremer, who instantly turned pale.

"Yes, at once; and if she didn't tell you so, it's because she didn't dare to, for fear of displeasing you—for she has more heart than you have, the child."

"Marthe! you speak of Marthe? Where is she?"

"Ah! that's too much. You know very well where she is, as you sent for her."

"I!"

"Yes, you—you sent a woman dressed out fine. And I, who swallowed her yarns, the wretch: that she was the wife of the Mayor of Choisy, and a lady of charity, and I don't know what all. Just see that she doesn't come back here, for if ever she falls under my hands—"

Cambremer felt faint. He began to understand that something had been attempted against his daughter, and he almost hesitated to question Madame Sorbier, who continued talking most verbosely. The other women seemed to approve of what their mistress said, for they vied with each other in sneering. As much exasperated as alarmed, the unfortunate father took the laundress by the arm, and in a tone which suddenly calmed her, exclaimed: "Don't you see then that you are killing me by letting me think that some misfortune has happened to my child?"

"Misfortune! no. I hope not."

"Don't keep me in suspense. What has happened?"

"Well, it happened that an hour after you went away, the little one was already asleep, when behold a carriage stops at the door, and from it alights a lady in grand style, who enters the yard like a cannon-ball and says to me: 'It is here that a man lives named Pierre Cambremer, who works on the Orleans railroad?' Naturally, I answered her, 'Yes.' 'His daughter is here?' she said to me. On that, as I had my suspicions, I asked her: 'What business is that of yours?' But you should have heard how she went on at me—that she came to do a good action, and that my way of receiving her was infamous—and so on, and so on."

"But, after all, what did she want with her?"

"To take her away of course. She told me how you had had a leg broken by a blow from a buffer at Choisy-le-Roi station—that your condition was too serious for them to bring you to Paris—that you were afraid you might die without embracing your daughter, and that she had then had her horses harnessed to come after the child."

"And you gave her to her?" roared Cambremer.

"Well! put yourself in my place. Could I believe that a princess like she was, would come and tell me a lie so as to steal the little one?"

"Steal! yes, she has stolen her, and she will kill her! I shall never see her again! Marthe, my child, where art thou?" cried the wretched father, running like a madman towards the room where he had left her.

The door was open. The little bed was empty. The child's playthings could be seen scattered about the floor. The switchman took his head in both of his hands and wept bitterly. The sight of his grief changed the feelings of the laundress and her women. There was now a concert of curses against the audacious creature who had committed this infamous abduction, and of lamentations over the fate of the poor little girl whom

every one in the house had loved. This feminine assemblage even commenced to murmur against the thoughtlessness of Madame Sorbier who had allowed herself to be caught in so clumsy a trap.

The kind creature whom the switchman had intrusted with his daughter was not noted for shrewdness, nor even for intelligence ; but her heart was excellent, and as soon as she realised the evil she had done, she gave way to loud exclamations of despair. Then reflecting all at once that it would be more sensible to repair her fault, she hastened to Cambremer, embraced him in spite of himself, and said : "I am only a fool. I deserve that you should break my head with your cane—but that would do no good. Rather come with me to the commissary's, I will tell him about the affair and give him a description of the female and of the vehicle she stowed the little one away in. They will know which way she went. They'll catch her, and, as true as my name is Julie Sorbier, I'll tear her eyes out, for I'll leave my work to run after her with the police."

"Which way did the carriage go ?" asked the switchman, in a voice softened by emotion.

"It went off towards the Barrière d'Italie—and at a pace—there were two bay horses which dragged it along like a feather."

"They have taken her out of Paris—they are going to kill her," murmured Cambremer.

"They won't have time—between now and to-morrow we will have our hands on her again. An equipage of that style is noticed ; and on the Place d'Italie, along the avenue, and on the road to Choisy, I know everybody ; besides there are a good many people who know the little one too—they must have seen her."

"Yes—that's my last hope—come," said Cambremer.

Mother Sorbier had already put on her cap, and gesticulated as though the thief was still within the range of her fists.

"One word," said the father, who by a superhuman effort had regained control of himself, "did she seem frightened when she saw the woman ?"

"Not at all. She cried when I told her that you were hurt, but she said to me at once, 'I want to see father.' 'There's a lady here who is going to take you to where he is,' I said to her. She cried out : 'Let us go ?' And then if you could have seen her eyes and her manner, why—a big girl twenty years old wouldn't have been more courageous. She let the lady kiss her, and got into the carriage by herself."

"Ah !" exclaimed Cambremer, "it is enough to drive one mad ! Marthe, who knew so well that they intended her harm, who knew that I was not on duty this evening on the line, how could she have believed that creature's lies ?"

"She loved you too much; that's why she lost her head," replied Mother Sorbier. "But we are amusing ourselves chattering, while the others carry her away. Come to the commissary's, that is better than bewailing here."

Cambremer realised that the good woman was right, and at once went out with her.

XXII.

FOR several days past Father Lecoq had been sustained by hope. He knew that Piédouche was following clues which promised to end in important discoveries, and he impatiently awaited more precise developments.

The Auvergnats were constantly seeking for the waiting-maid, and Cambremer had promised to bring Father Vinet the O'Sullivan genealogy.

Now, Father Vinet, as the reader knows, was the Nabob of Bahour, who, when required, laid aside his personality as an Indian prince to become an agent. The interview with the switchman had been fixed for Thursday evening, and the same afternoon at five o'clock, His Excellency, Djafer, drove as usual in his equipage to the Bois de Boulogne. Only, on this occasion, he was not accompanied by his black attendant, the latter being indisposed. The climate of Paris did not agree with him it seemed, at least so his master had deigned to tell the people at the Grand Hotel. So the aforesaid attendant remained in the apartment, where no one would presume to trouble him in his solitude, and a little before nightfall he stole out, disguised as a citizen of small means, in view of waiting for Cambremer on the Place du Château d'Eau. Meanwhile M. Lecoq had slowly gone round the lake two or three times, in a closed landau—for Indians are chilly—and was careful to show himself often at his carriage window. On the way he passed Arabella Disney, accompanied by her inseparable companion, Herminie, and saluted them courteously. But at six o'clock he took the road back to Paris, and his coachman, instead of driving to the Grand Hotel, by the Champs Elysées, turned into the Avenue de Wagram, and then followed the outer boulevards. Half an hour later the vehicle reached the open space where the Rue Oberkampf and the Chaussée de Menilmontant cut across the boulevard. And then the driver, slackening the speed of his horses, followed the wall of the Père Lachaise cemetery to a certain unfringed spot, where his master could alight without danger of being remarked.

From the landau, which on leaving the Grand Hotel had contained a nabob in a turban and silk robes, there now alighted a man who looked like a petty capitalist, wearing a grey hat and a long frock-coat. Then Pigache's friend went on with his equipage and drew up on the Boulevard de Charonne, not far from the hospitable counter of a wine-shop.

In the meanwhile, M. Lecoq, transformed during the journey, walked slowly along with a roll of papers under his arm, directing his steps towards the court where he had rented a small apartment, under the name of Vinet. Access was gained to this court by the Rue de la Roquette, close to the square, where the Mairie of the 11th Arrondissement is situated, and Louis's father could not reach it without crossing the Place where his son would be guillotined if he did not succeed in saving him. It was not the first time that he had come this lugubrious way, for he invariably took the same route to his office. He had chosen it knowingly, and it often happened that on the way he met worthy Pigache, who was in the secret of his projects and disguises, and who took care to saunter about in the vicinity, of an evening.

Ex-number 33 and his former superior met as old acquaintances, and had a short but pointed chat together. Pigache gave news of the condemned man—news which he received from a warder of the prison, an old campaigner, whom he had introduced one evening to Father Vinet. On the particular Thursday when Cambremer was to come and consult the so-called Father Vinet respecting the O'Sullivan inheritance, Pigache, summoned by his duties to the Prefecture, was unable to meet M. Lecoq on the way, but the warder who was smoking his pipe under the trees on the esplanade saw the agent approach, and accosted him without ceremony. "Well, papa Vinet," he said to him, slapping him in a friendly way on the shoulder "you always find something to do then?"

"Yes, yes, as you see," replied Father Lecoq, showing the black leather wrapper, in which he carried his papers.

To tell the truth, he was not in the humour for a chat with the warder, and was anxious to get to his office. But as, after all, Piédouche would not bring Cambremer till towards half-past eight, he had some time before him, and so as not to be discourteous to the warder whom he was anxious to please, he resigned himself to a short conversation.

"No doubt there is business to be found in the neighbourhood," continued the warder, "although you are not very well-known here as yet."

"I have nothing to complain of," replied the so-called Father Vinet. "There are showers of bankrupts just now, and as my speciality is to arrange their affairs, I have plenty of work."

"That proves that one man's loss is another's gain," said the warder, in a doctoral tone. "If there were no failures, you wouldn't make a living. If there were no thieves and assassins to look after, I shouldn't have enough to keep myself in tobacco."

"All the same," sighed the agent, "it must be hard to pass one's days and nights near a man who is to have his head cut off."

"Pooh! a fellow gets used to it. And then, don't you see, so long as they are alive they hope till the very last moment. That keeps them from being sad. They pass their time playing cards with us, and you may believe me if you like, but they play with as good a heart as though they were having a game in a café. The last one who was guillotined was crazy over piquet, and when he beat me he was as proud as a king. Nevertheless, it didn't bring him good luck."

"And the one you have now," asked M. Lecoq, in a voice which trembled despite his efforts, "does he play cards as well?"

"Oh! he's something different. You understand, a young man of good family; he doesn't so soon accustom himself to the idea of turning a somersault on the see-saw. The others, the ordinary customers, they have always had an idea they would finally get into trouble for doing something foolish. But when a man has always had money it comes hard."

"The poor boy must grieve."

"My faith, no. He's firm as a rock. He never complains, never asks for anything. One might say that he had given up all hope. He's a game fellow, and, look here! I know what I am talking 'about—I have seen twenty or more—well, I'll bet that the morning he takes his last leap he will walk as though he were going to his wedding."

"As though he was going to his wedding," repeated the old man, bitterly, as he thought of Thérèse.

"I say, Father Vinet," continued the facetious jailer, "do you know that we are chatting on the very spot where he will pass an uncomfortable quarter of an hour?"

M. Lecoq became pale. Absorbed as he was, he had not noticed that the keeper had accosted him at the end of a passage which leads from La Roquette. On looking down he saw that his feet rested on one of the long narrow slabs, symmetrically arranged, and formerly used for the supports of the scaffold to rest upon. He quickly drew back, and the warder, who noticed his trouble, said to him, laughing: "That makes you feel queer, eh! Papa Vinet? I'll bet you never saw that."

"No, and I've no desire to see it," stammered Lecoq.

"Why? It's a curiosity; and then it's managed so quick that a fellow hasn't time to have goose-flesh—especially since they use the new machine.

No more steps, no more platform. All on the ground floor. It's put up in twenty-five minutes, is no more trouble than a sewing-machine, and makes less noise. If you liked, Father Vinet, I'll let you know the evening before by our friend Pigache, and I'll have you admitted to the esplanade, to one of the choice positions, among the reporters."

"No, no; thank you. I shouldn't have the courage to look. But you think, then, that—this young man will be executed?"

"As sure as that we are both here and that my pipe is going out. Just think of it!—a gentleman! If they changed his sentence to transportation it would make too much of a fuss. And then, between you and I, he will get no more than he deserves. Two murders at once! He did not go at it with a slow hand, the fellow."

"But," articulated the old man, with difficulty, "that will not be before six weeks. There is the appeal—"

"They have shortened all that, Father Vinet. I wouldn't give him more than a fortnight longer. You'll see. He is only twenty-eight, but, all the same, he is getting pretty old."

"Excuse me," exclaimed M. Lecoq, taking out his watch hastily, "it is a quarter to seven, and I have an engagement for seven o'clock precisely, with a contractor who has just filed his schedules."

And without waiting for the warder's reply, Louis's father quickly walked away from the horrible spot where his son's head was to fall. M. Lecoq went off feeling sick at heart and cursing his misfortune in having thought of stopping to chat with the warder. Never had he been so bluntly told that his son was irrevocably lost, and that all the hopes that deluded his paternal heart were senseless. Pigache, who did not disguise the truth very much with him, still told it with some regard for his feelings. And then these descriptions of the sinister machine, the view of the gloomy esplanade where people only assembled to gaze on the agonies of a man about to die—all these foretastes of the torture overcame him. He hastened to quit these paving-stones on which he seemed to see spots of blood; he almost ran, and arrived all out of breath at the door of the wretched house where he had hired a miserable apartment, consisting of three rooms on the third floor in the rear.

This apartment, furnished under Piédouche's auspices, was just what was needed for a man who did not care to have his neighbours pry into his affairs. The house, as we have said, was situated at the end of a court, which only communicated with the Rue de la Roquette. The other inmates of the building, a corner of which the spurious nabob occupied, were all labouring people, and the name and character he had assumed gave him the right of citizenship among his fellow-tenants. He called himself M. Vinet, and said that he was an agent who resided in the suburbs and only came to Paris occasionally, in the evening, to receive clients who were pressed for time and wished to consult him. Now the poor people who lived in the neighbourhood had often need of advice, and he charged them nothing for his. Sometimes it was a question of a dispute with an employer, now of a litigation with a customer respecting the settlement of an account; and to these poor illiterate people, a gentleman who knew the law and gave consultations for nothing was a valuable man. A fortnight had not yet elapsed since Father Vinet had sat for the first time in his leather-covered chair before the desk in his office, and the reputation he already enjoyed in the neighbourhood had brought many clients to him. Tradesmen in tight circumstances, and even speculators who were not above suspicion, came in

numbers to ask his advice, and it is certain that he would willingly have dispensed with this practice, but he bore up bravely against misfortune, and, as he was really well informed in business matters, he found a way of contenting his clients without compromising himself. However, he only received twice a week, and never on Thursdays, so that he was sure no one would come to trouble him while he chatted with Cambremer.

Piédouche, thoroughly informed as to all the details of his patron's life, had specially chosen that day for the meeting with the switchman, and all the particulars of the interview had been determined upon beforehand between him and M. Lecoq. The foresight and sagacity of the illustrious ex-detective shone forth especially in the creation of this personage, the agent Vinet, which he had invented and made complete in all its bearings. On deciding to try and save his son's life, M. Lecoq had realised that he would have to play several parts. That of the nabob answered very well for certain necessities of the situation. As a nabob, the father of the condemned man could openly enter the society frequented by the person whom by degrees he had come to regard as his son's greatest enemy ; and, moreover, it enabled him to study his habits and connections and detect his secrets. And it is time to explain how M. Lecoq had come to suspect Tolbiac of having concocted the plot into which Thérèse's lover had fallen.

The old trail-hunter, once called "Father Bring-to-light," always acted on principle, and seldom trusted to chance. He only valued facts for the inferences to be deducted from them, and he only approached these by other deductions as to the causes which had produced the facts. It was thus that, after the condemnation of his son, he had said to himself, "A man and a woman were murdered in the Rue de l'Arbalète. It was not my son who committed these two crimes, but the appearances accusing him have a reason for their existence. He was evidently indirectly mixed up in the affair, innocently, perhaps, but he was in some way connected with it ; and, for instance, when he contends that he never knew Mary Fassitt, he does not tell the truth. Why doesn't he tell it ? That is what remains to be known ; and as it is no longer possible for me to obtain a confession from him, which he refused to make to me when I questioned him at the prison, I must, at any cost, discover what is the cause of his silence, and it is in England that it must be sought."

So Father Lecoq went to London, taking Piédouche, whose talents were not to be disdained, with him. He there closely inquired into his son's life while at a boarding-school in the suburbs of London—but the investigation did not yield the results he had anticipated. No one remembered any young girl named Mary Fassitt, and the people of Clapham had almost forgotten the escapades of a French pupil who had somewhat shocked them in days gone by.

On the other hand, M. Lecoq having more than once, while actively engaged in his profession, come in contact with the principal officers of the English police, he naturally consulted some of them. The affair of the Rue de l'Arbalète had caused quite a stir on the other side of the Channel, and these officers interested themselves in the misfortune which had befallen their French compeer. It was one of them, an old detective known by a number of exploits, who first called Father Lecoq's attention to Tolbiac. Tolbiac had recently worked with this detective, who was well informed as to his morality, and who described him to Lecoq as being capable of doing anything mean : moreover, he talked of the O'Sullivan inheritance as a very suspicious affair. "Tolbiac left England to engage in

lucrative intrigues in connection with that matter," said the English detective, "and it is in that direction you must look. Try and find out, in the first place, if the woman murdered in the Rue de l'Arbalète did not belong to the O'Sullivan family, and if she was not known to Tolbiac."

He added that the major's heirs had remained undiscoverable up to that time, although there were reasons for believing that they lived in France. On these indications, M. Lecoq had conceived the first part of his plan, that which consisted in disguising himself as an Indian nabob so as to introduce himself into Tolbiac's society. But, on establishing himself at the Grand Hotel, he knew very well that he would sometimes need to relinquish his rich apartment and his personality as a nabob. From that resulted the opening of M. Vinet's office in the Rue de la Roquette. This office, Piédouche, who passed himself off for a lawyer's clerk, had furnished according to the rules of the profession he practised so well. By his care, the outside door turned noiselessly on its well-oiled hinges; some gimlet holes allowed his master to scrutinise all visitors before he admitted them, the passage being lighted in the evening by a special lamp placed there and supplied with oil at M. Vinet's expense. The floors of the three rooms were covered with matting to deaden the sound of footsteps, the windows opening into the yard were furnished with double curtains; the lamps were shaded, and the inside door supplied with strong bolts.

On the evening when M. Lecoq arrived to wait for the switchman, he entered this sanctuary alone, having noticed with no little satisfaction that his neighbours had gone out to take a breath of fresh air on the boulevards instead of remaining, as was their custom, seated before the door of the house. He preferred that Cambremer and Piédouche should pass in unseen, knowing by experience that it is always best to hide one's life, and that the witness of the most insignificant incident may prove troublesome at some unexpected moment.

He lit the lamp in the passage and the one in his office also. He put on some sleeves of green lustring, and a cap with a visor which came down over his eyes; spread papers covered with writing before him, piled up packages of documents bearing names traced in large letters on their wrappers which, however, did not contain a single legal paper. Thus prepared, furnished with all the attributes of his profession, and with answers ready to anticipated questions, he awaited the visitor whom Piédouche was to bring him, and to pass the time, reflected on an interesting conversation which he had had during the day with M. Holtz—that is to say, with Tolbiac.

XXIII.

FOR several days past the clues discovered by Piédouche had promised great things, and M. Lecoq congratulated himself very much on having followed the advice given him by the old detective in London. The coal-dealer and his wife were ardently prosecuting their search, and it was allowable to hope that they would succeed in finding the servant. The first information furnished by Cambremer was about to be supplemented. And from these different directions the connection between the known facts and Tolbiac's conduct could be divined looming ahead.

However, on this Thursday afternoon, three hours before the nabob had gone out in his carriage, Tolbiac himself had made an important move. He had come, disguised as M. Holtz, to inform his client that his first steps

had been more successful than he had dared to hope ; that he was almost sure he had discovered a member of the O'Sullivan family, a man who lived in France. Tolbiac had added that he did not think it expedient to enter for the time being more minutely into details, as he was not yet sure of the fact, but, within a few days, after acquiring positive certitude that this individual really belonged to the major's family, he would bring his excellency the Nabob of Bahour the necessary documents to establish this person's identity. He had even promised to bring the supposed O'Sullivan in person to the Indian prince who wished to enrich him. And when the prince asked if Tolbiac believed that only one of the major's heirs survived, the latter had replied he was inclined to think such was the case, and that he still lacked certain documents to establish the decease of other members of the family, but hoped to procure them very soon. On this, he had retired, promising to return before the end of the week, and then bring with him decisive proofs and positive information.

So M. Lecoq might well believe that he approached the end, and that the mystery was about to be solved. Only, he had not yet divined the motive which actuated Tolbiac's conduct. Had the detective invented a false heir ? Was he going to manufacture some apocryphal documents to enable this false heir to claim, if not the major's estate, at least the nabob's liberality ? And, above all, did he merely purpose to extort a large sum, which he would divide with his accomplice, or had he other designs more or less directly connected with the crime of the Rue de l'Arbalète ?

This was the great point, and Louis's father was reflecting upon it profoundly, when he heard a ring at the door of his apartment. He rose, went on tiptoe to the outer door, applied his eye to one of the holes made expressly for examining his visitors, and recognised Piédouche accompanied by a man who could be none other than Cambremer. He hastened to open the door to them, and received, in the first place, a volley of salutations and compliments from worthy Piédouche, who played the part of a citizen bringing a friend to a lawyer's office. M. Lecoq played his own rôle as he knew how to do, and politely invited these gentlemen to enter.

Of course, while replying to ex-number 29, he closely scrutinised Cambremer. It was his system to begin by examining a person's physiognomy. He never failed to apply this rule to all comers, even to those of little importance, and he had always found that it operated well. Thanks to his experience and the sagacity he owed to nature, a glance sufficed to inform him as to what sort of man he had to do with. Now, Piédouche had drawn him a portrait of the switchman which he did not think a good likeness. He had described him as an honest workman, with a calm face and easy manners. But Cambremer appeared with contracted features, a gloomy face, and earnest eyes. His gestures were nervous and his manner irritable.

M. Lecoq did not accuse his subordinate of having been mistaken in the character of the man he had brought with him, but he suspected that something unforeseen had happened : and he was not wrong. Besides, Piédouche had given him a look which signified, "There is something new ;" but which did not mean "There is danger."

However, not to leave his employer longer in suspense, Piédouche had hardly taken his place beside Cambremer in front of the agent's desk, than he commenced in these terms : " Monsieur Vinet, I told you that I would bring you a friend who needed your advice respecting an inheritance he is in search of. It seems that's not the thing exactly. Something has just

happened to him that he couldn't foresee ; his daughter has been stolen from him—the little one who was to inherit—”

Despite his great powers of self-control, M. Lecoq could not prevent himself from starting, but he speedily considered the event announced to him, in all its bearings. “Explain yourself, sir,” he said, addressing himself to Cambremer.

“What would you have me say ?” exclaimed Cambremer. “Since they have stolen my child, I’m crazy. And I should not have come to see you, nor have kept my engagement with my comrade, if I hadn’t fancied you might perhaps help me to find Marthe.”

“And you are right,” exclaimed Piédouche, “for M. Vinet also works in that class of cases. I told you so over there on the Place du Château d’Eau, and I repeat it to you now before M. Vinet, who will not contradict me.”

“Certainly not,” said the agent ; “I attend to all sorts of investigations in the interests of families, and you could not have gone to a better place. Will you please to inform me then, sir, how this has happened ? But, in the first place, I have a question to ask you. This child who has disappeared, is she really the one who may have claims to an inheritance ?”

“It’s certainly she. I have only one—or rather, I had but one ; for now—”

“Calm yourself, monsieur. Perhaps she is only lost.”

“No. I tell you that she was taken away from me. The commissary of police also wanted to make me think that I was mistaken, that people didn’t steal a little girl who had no fortune in that way.”

“Did you tell him that yours would perhaps be rich ?” asked Father Lecoq, quickly.

“What good would that have done ? He would have laughed in my face. I begged him to help me, to send officers all through the suburbs, whereupon he quietly answered that he would advise the prefect of police, and that the prefect would issue orders. That was yesterday evening ; I returned there twice to-day. Then he declared to me that they were searching, that Marthe’s description had been sent to the gendarmerie—Yes, and while they were writing to the officers, my child was being carried away, was being killed, perhaps.”

“At what time did she disappear, and how ?”

“Yesterday evening towards nine o’clock. I had intrusted her to a neighbour in my absence, and when I returned home, I was told that a lady in a fine carriage had come and told the women in the house that I had broken my leg at Choisy-le-Roi ; that I asked to see my daughter, and that she had come after her—they believed what this thief said, and gave her the little one.”

“Which way did the carriage go ?”

“I live on the Boulevard de l’Hôpital. It followed the Boulevard towards the Place d’Italie, and then took the route to Choisy. Twenty persons saw it.”

“Then they could indicate the colour of the horses and the dress of the coachman. Your neighbours could also tell how the lady was dressed, and how old she is.”

“She is still young, and was richly dressed.”

“You suspect no one ?”

“Who would you have me suspect ? Do I frequent women with carriages ? Marthe only knew me since her poor mother died.”

"And yet," said Piédouche, "they had already tried to abduct her. You remember, comrade, that on the day we drank a glass of beer in front of the Jardin des Plantes, the child met an old woman who wanted to take her away by force?"

"Yes, I recollect," said Cambremer, bitterly, "and I am to blame for not having thought more about it. I ought to have watched better over Marthe; I ought never to have left her."

"When you went away yesterday evening, did you tell any one that you would be gone for some time?" asked M. Lecoq.

"No one but my neighbour, who did not mention it."

"But you had not told her where you were going?"

"No. I went out to take a step which my comrade here had advised me to take, and which I wouldn't speak of to any one, no matter who. I went to Boulogne to see Madame Lecomte, whose name is on the paper which refers to the inheritance."

"You no doubt wished to ascertain if she was really the person who was referred to?"

"Yes, and I know now. That lady's daughter is related to my little one. That is perhaps why they tried to kill her yesterday at the same time as they took Marthe away."

At this news, M. Lecoq turned pale, and Piédouche, who had not heard of it before, did not try to hide the astonishment it caused him.

XXIV.

ON learning that an attempt had been made to kill Louis's betrothed, M. Lecoq had received a shock from which he with difficulty recovered. He loved Thérèse sincerely, and was profoundly grateful to her for remaining faithful to the love she bore the condemned man. It was very natural that he should be moved by the danger she had been exposed to, and the danger which threatened her in the future. But a feeling which almost resembled joy was mingled with his emotion. The two attempts made at the same moment on two of the major's heirs confirmed everything that the old trail-hunter had foreseen, and encouraged him to persevere in the course he had adopted. It seemed to him that a corner of the veil was already rising, and that he would soon be able to discover the mysterious bond which connected the crimes of the Rue de l'Arbalète with the O'Sullivan inheritance. Nevertheless, the interest he felt for Mademoiselle Lecomte soon rose uppermost, and he wished to know precisely what had happened at Boulogne. "They attempted, you say, to kill the young lady?" he asked, in anguish.

"Or to carry her off," replied Cambremer; "it is the same thing. Those who have taken my Marthe have taken her to kill her."

"But they did not succeed, did they, with Mademoiselle Lecomte?"

"No. I happened to be there, fortunately, on the road, near the little garden gate. I went at them with a stick, the two villains. I almost killed one, and the other ran away—"

"Then Mademoiselle Lecomte received no harm?"

"None at all. And she took it with extraordinary courage. She even forbade my saying a word about it to her mother, who received me very well, and replied with a good grace to all my questions. She recognised Marthe as the young lady's cousin, and even begged me to bring the little one to see her." On pronouncing the name of the poor child whom he had

just lost, Cambremer quickly forgot his visit to Madame Lecomte, and bluntly added : "But I didn't come to tell you what I did at Boulogne ; I came to ask you if you would undertake to find my child ?" And as the supposed Father Vinet did not hasten to reply, he continued : "I know that you live by your profession. I'm not rich, but I have a thousand francs laid by, and I'll give them to you with a good heart if you will restore her to me."

"We will talk about that when I have found her."

"Then you hope to find her ?" exclaimed Cambremer.

"Without doubt. I never engage in an affair when I don't believe I can succeed in it. But I will act only on two conditions."

"As many as you please."

"On condition, in the first place, that you tell no one that I am acting on your behalf. You complained to the commissary ; that is all right. The intervention of the police can only benefit you, but I don't wish to work with them. They would be in my way, and I should be in theirs."

"I understand that. However, I don't expect much from the Prefecture. They have too much to do to occupy themselves about a poor devil like me. And I even think that they suspect me of not telling the truth. I learned that they had been applying for information about me at the office of the Orleans Railway Company."

"And you are sure that the information they obtained was good ?" asked Father Vinet, who was not sorry to make certain respecting his client's morality.

"Oh, on that point I'm easy. For ten years I've been employed by the company. They know me, and my poor Marthe as well. She was always round about the station and the line. The chief clerks kissed her when they met her. And when the manager heard of my misfortune he sent a description of the little one to all the stations along the line, with orders to have the people with whom she might be found arrested."

"That is very fortunate," said M. Lecoq, quickly. He did not care to find himself in competition with the police, who, being naturally inquisitive, might take a notion to pry into the conduct and person of the so-called M. Vinet ; but he had not the same motive for mistrusting the actions of the principal officers of a commercial corporation. He even congratulated himself on having their assistance, and decided to utilize it without its being known. "I now come to the other condition," he continued. "This condition is that you employ me, at the same time, in connection with the inheritance which will fall to your daughter if we can establish her claim."

"Yes, I understand," said Cambremer, with some bitterness ; "you don't wish to lose the profit you would derive from that affair, if successful. Very well, then, I will tell you all that I know about it."

"You are mistaken, my dear sir. If I am anxious to deal with the affair in question, it is only because, in my opinion, it is the surest way to find your daughter. She has only been abducted to prevent her from receiving the inheritance which belongs to her, and those who abducted her can only be co-heirs who wish to obtain her part of the fortune."

"You are perhaps right," said Cambremer, sadly ; "but then it is much worse. These wretches won't hesitate to murder Marthe, so as to get rid of her. What good would it do them to make her disappear if they couldn't prove she was dead ?"

"Who knows ! Perhaps they only wish to prevent her from appearing,"

replied M. Lecoq, hesitatingly. In reality, he thought that the switchman reasoned correctly, and that the chances were small of ever finding Marthe alive again. Nevertheless, he added : "If they intended to do away with her, what prevented them from having her killed some evening in a lonely street when she was on her way home from school?"

"They were afraid of being caught. There are policemen and passers-by in the streets, while, where they have taken her, they can no doubt kill her with impunity."

"I don't see that. A murder is more difficult to conceal in a village than in Paris. And then, how would the child's death profit them if the death was not established by proof? They would have to produce a certificate of death, and they would be very careful not to do that, because, in producing it, they would betray themselves."

"Scoundrels capable of doing what they have done are never lacking in expedients. Don't you see they could so arrange it that Marthe's body might be found in a deserted neighbourhood, far from the place where they live? The papers would announce that a little girl had been found murdered. I should take steps to find out if she were mine; and when I had recognised her, the certificate of death would be issued. And then, for the first time, the brigands would show themselves. Perhaps they would even take the precaution not to claim the inheritance for a year or two."

Father Vinet did not reply at once to those predictions, which were suggested to Cambremer by his despair. He did not hide from himself that they were founded on good sense, but he had certain reasons (which he did not wish to disclose to Cambremer), for not believing them; the principal one being that the switchman's daughter not being the only heir it would not suffice for the abductors to murder her to insure them the inheritance. Thérèse Lecomte was exposed to the very same dangers, and while Thérèse escaped them, the object of the thieves would not be attained. Father Lecoq had already determined on a plan for protecting Louis's betrothed, and he judged it useless to explain this plan to Cambremer. So he contented himself with saying gently : "My dear sir, we must not always look at things in their worst light. Leave me to act and the affair will turn out better than you think. I have hope and almost the certitude of it. If you still intend to confide your interests to me, please show me the document on which you found your belief that your daughter is the heiress to an estate."

"The document? The one I have doesn't prove much. The comrade who brought me here must have talked to you about it. It is a paper my late mother-in-law left to my wife with a pile of others, and I should never have paid any attention to them if an individual, whose name my comrade must have told you, hadn't come last winter to talk with me about a distant relative of Marthe's, who had, he pretended, left some fortune. However, I've never since seen that individual, although I went several times to call on him."

"Have you that paper with you?"

"Yes," said Cambremer, fumbling in his pocket, "here it is. Take it and keep it to examine. I have no use for it, for I only think of finding Marthe."

"I will find her and the inheritance as well," replied Father Vinet, who hastened to stow away the document he had received from the switchman.

At the same time, he rose to indicate that the interview was at an end. He was in a hurry to read the paper which would perhaps solve the sanguinary mystery which nothing had as yet unravelled.

XXV.

Piédouche could take a hint, and he divined very well that his employer had nothing more to say to the switchman. However, he had his programme to carry out, and it had been agreed between him and M. Lecoq, that as soon as the interview was over, he should go away with Cambremer, leave him in a short time and adroitly return to the Grand Hotel, to re-assume his rôle as an Asiatic attendant, the nabob requiring that he should accompany him to the opera in the evening. So he did not try to detain Marthe's father, but went out with him, after warmly thanking the agent.

The spurious Father Vinet conducted them as far as the door, and ten minutes later he left himself, after extinguishing the lamps. Desirous as he was to see what the document left with him by Cambremer contained, he knew how to control his impatience, and postpone perusal till he was alone again in his handsome apartment at the hotel. He had not a minute to lose to become the Nabob of Bahour once more, for all his time during the evening was engaged. He was to show himself in his box at the new Opera House, where a special performance was to be given for the benefit of a distinguished foreign artiste. Tolbiac and Arabella had announced their intention of being present, and M. Lecoq was particularly anxious to meet them there.

So he had hardly time enough to prepare himself, and he knew that expeditious Piédouche would find some means of promptly ridding himself of his companion, and of returning to the hotel almost as soon as himself. M. Lecoq went away then noiselessly, and swiftly gained the Rue de la Roquette, which he followed in view of reaching his carriage. He was again obliged to cross the sinister spot where the executions take place, and averted his head so as not to see the gloomy walls of the prison and the high gate which opens at dawn to allow the condemned men to pass out on their way to eternity.

He speedily reached the outer boulevard, where he found Pigache's friend seated, whip in hand, on his high seat. This model coachman had not succumbed to the seductions of the taverns in the neighbourhood, but had steadily remained at his post. The locality was but little frequented, and no one was about to see the spurious agent take his place in this handsome carriage. On the way, he effected his transformation as usual, so that when he reached the Grand Hotel, Father Vinet no longer existed. It was the Nabob of Bahour that alighted, appearing more majestic than ever to the servants who escorted him to his apartment.

As soon as he found himself alone, he took his place at a table, on which stood two candelabra bearing several tapers, and set to work to examine the valuable paper he had brought with him. It was a large sheet, made yellow by time, and covered with fine writing, which was all the more difficult to decipher, as the ink had become very faint. At the top, M. Lecoq in the first place read these lines, which seemed to have been traced by a trembling hand : "Expecting to die from one moment to another, I leave my daughter Catherine the information which follows, and hope that it may some day enable either her or her children to save something from the wreck of our family property, which my lamented father unfortunately pledged to English usurers." This was signed : "Elizabeth O'Sullivan," wife of Guichard, and dated at Abbeville, the 11th of September, 1838.

Next followed a genealogical sketch, which classed separately the different branches of a family springing from one and the same trunk. There were five of these branches, and above them was written the name of the common ancestor :

“ MAURICE DAVID O’SULLIVAN,

“ Irish gentleman ; Captain of Infantry.”

This was followed by the subjoined data : “ Born in 1759, at Dublin ; died, in the same city, on the 25th of December, 1810, leaving, by my regretted mother, who had preceded him to the tomb by six years, five children, who are :

“ 1. James Patrick O’Sullivan, born in 1780 ; left in 1799 for Canada, with the rank of ensign ; since gone to the East Indies, whence to my knowledge he has never returned. I do not know if he ever married, or if he is still living, not having received any news from him since the death of our father.

“ 2. Anna O’Sullivan, born in 1790, married in 1805 to John Slough ; died in 1809. Anna, my eldest sister, had by John Slough one daughter, Julia, born in 1806, which daughter married William Nesley in London in 1821, and died in 1828, leaving one daughter, Sophia Nesley. This daughter, having been born in 1822, ought now to be sixteen years of age, and I have recently learned that she is a governess in the family of a nobleman living near Salisbury, and that she is about to be married.

“ 3. Elizabeth O’Sullivan, that is myself. I was born in 1798, and, finding myself without means on the death of my father, I was received out of charity in a Roman Catholic institution in Dublin, where poor young girls are brought up and placed, at 14 years of age, in a commercial house at Abbeville, in France. It was there that I was married in 1816 to a foreman in a manufactory, Pierre Guichard, whom I had the misfortune to lose two years later. I remained a widow, with one daughter, Catherine, who will soon be twenty-one years old, and whom I hope to see married to a worthy young man who works in a cotton-mill near our home and who is named Jean Bernier. May my dear Catherine be more fortunate than her poor mother.

“ 4. Georgiana O’Sullivan, the elder of my two younger sisters, born in 1801. She came to France two years after me and procured a situation in Paris, where, I have also heard, she was married in 1818 to a stock-broker’s clerk named Lecomte. I have also heard that she had a son, and that she has been dead a long time; but I could never find out what became of the son, although I wrote several times both to my sister and her husband, receiving no reply.”

For the first time since M. Lecoq had commenced reading this somewhat artlessly written statement, he paused and commenced to think aloud. “ This son is Thérèse’s father, as Madame Lecomte told the switchman,” he muttered. “ The dates agree perfectly. Lecomte was born in 1820 ; he was married in 1855, and died, at forty-nine years of age, in 1869. That is it exactly. Thérèse was born in 1857. She is the grand-niece of Major O’Sullivan, her father being his nephew. Then she is related to him one degree nearer than Cambremer’s daughter. This writing which I hold is dated in 1838, and stops at Catherine Guichard, niece of the major, who was that same year married to Jean Bernier. But Piédoch, who is in Cambremer’s confidence, told me that this Catherine Guichard becoming Catherine Bernier by marriage had a daughter named Pauline, who married

Cambremer, and died leaving him the child that has just been stolen. So this child belongs to the third generation, and is, consequently, the major's great-grand-niece."

Having thus stated his premises, M. Lecoq tried to draw from them a conclusion. "Admitting," he continued, "that the abduction of the little girl, and the attempt against Mademoiselle Lecomte, had but one and the same author, it is, perhaps, the heir of another branch, an heir of a degree still more remote than them, and, consequently, interested in getting them out of the way. Let us see. We have the eldest of the sisters, Anna, married to a man named Slough, and the mother of Julia Slough, who married a man named Nesley, and had a daughter named Sophia. This Sophia was on the point of being married in 1838. The family history goes no farther. If she still lives, she is related to the Major in the same degree as Thérèse; if she is dead and has left a son or a daughter, that son or daughter is of the same degree as Marthe Cambremer." And M. Lecoq added almost immediately: "If the heir who has made these two attempts at abduction is of this branch, the second hypothesis is the only one which can be admitted, for Sophia Nesley would not have dreamed of ridding herself of Marthe, who is only a great-grand-niece. The question is then to know who this Sophia Nesley married in 1838, and what became of her. But I have still a branch to examine. Let us see the statement respecting the last sister."

And taking again the paper which he had momentarily laid on the table, he read: "5. Helen O'Sullivan, the youngest of my sisters, born in 1810. Our mother died in bringing her into the world, and I have not seen her since she was in her infancy. She has been still more unfortunate than myself, for she was reduced to becoming an actress in England. She plays in country towns, and has just married a strolling actor named Harry Fassitt."

"Fassitt!" exclaimed M. Lecoq. "Why, that is the name of the murdered woman!"

XXVI.

THE surprise experienced by M. Lecoq was only equalled by his joy. He had not expected to make such a discovery, but he understood all its importance.

The woman murdered in the Rue de l'Arbalète was named Mary Fassitt. It was quite permissible to suppose that she was the daughter of this Helen O'Sullivan, the major's youngest sister who married Harry Fassitt, the strolling actor. And if this supposition were correct, all was clear and all explained. Mary Fassitt was the major's niece, and, consequently, his sole heir. Thérèse Lecomte, grand-niece, only came after her, and after Thérèse Lecomte followed Marthe Cambremer, the great-grand-niece. If any man was interested in successively destroying all the members of the O'Sullivan family, he would necessarily commence by killing Mary Fassitt. She was the first obstacle to be removed, Thérèse Lecomte the second, and Marthe Cambremer the third.

In the last degree there only remained the children of Sophia Nesley, supposing she had left any, and these children, if they survived all their collaterals, would necessarily receive the whole of the major's estate. There were then strong presumptions for believing that one of them was the murderer of Mary Fassitt.

Thus reasoned M. Lecoq, but serious objections soon presented themselves

to his sagacious mind. "Yes," he muttered, "but nothing proves that Mary Fassitt was the daughter of the youngest sister of James O'Sullivan. It is even probable that she was not. In the first place the name of Fassitt is not uncommon in England. Next, and above all, the woman of the Rue de l'Arbalète was certainly not more than twenty-two or twenty-three years old when she was killed. Helen O'Sullivan was married in 1837, that is to say, forty years ago. For her to be the mother of Mary Fassitt, this daughter must have been born to her after she had been married during fifteen or eighteen years, and when she herself was more than forty years old. Added to that, Helen was an actress in a strolling company, married to a poor devil of a country actor. Poverty, then, must have made her older than her years." And M. Lecoq began to doubt.

Then following up his deductions, he said to himself : "On the other hand, the murdered woman had certainly the style of beauty and the irregular life of a creature born between the side scenes of a theatre and brought up by parents who acted for their living. She probably acted herself before she came to France, and that will explain why I found no trace of a Mary Fassitt in London or the suburbs. She no doubt changed her name when she went on the stage. And," thought the father of the condemned man, sadly, "Louis might very well have met her, when she was still a young girl, and while he was in the boarding-school at Clapham. He often ran away to go to the London theatres, I had forgotten that. That is something that will have to be looked into again, and I have no longer the time to investigate it. I have hardly three weeks left in which to save my son. The executioner won't wait. He might take him from me while I was conducting the investigation in England. No, no. It is here that the search must be made, and the more I reflect the more I am persuaded that the crime was committed by some one who was interested in destroying all the heirs of Major O'Sullivan save one—himself or one he is interested in. And so this interested person is now trying to do away with Thérèse. To think that I, who look out for everything, I who know all the notable Parisian families on the tips of my finger, had never taken the trouble to find out who was Mademoiselle Lecomte's grandmother on her father's side. I knew that her father had made a large fortune in banking and contented myself with that. That is what it is to live in a time when everything is mixed up. People lose all traditions, all traces of their forefathers. It is forgotten where folks came from, and no one is able to go back in his genealogy to the third generation. Ah! the genealogies of old times were useful. They facilitated investigations."

Having thus given way to arguments and regrets, M. Lecoq again took the statement Cambremer had confided to him and re-read it attentively. This document, valuable because its author was evidently in good faith, clearly showed the relationship between Mademoiselle Lecomte and Marthe Cambremer ; it also established their eventual rights to an enormous fortune, for undoubtedly the Ensign James Patrick O'Sullivan referred to in this paper was the one who had become a major and a millionaire in the East Indies. M. Lecoq hoped to defend Marthe's and Thérèse's rights later on, but for the present he only thought of demonstrating his son's innocence by finding Mary Fassitt's real murderer. "This murderer," he pondered, "is the representative of one of the other branches of the O'Sullivan family ; it must be the last of the descendants of Anna, the major's eldest sister." He paused and then asked himself,

"Where is this descendant? In Paris, probably, for he pursues his

work—making attempts on the lives of his co-heirs—one of whom, the daughter of this workman, is probably by this time no longer alive, and Mademoiselle Lecomte will not escape unless I succeed in binding him so that he can injure no one. But in what corner of the city, and under what name is he hiding? Suppose it were Tolbiac," muttered M. Lecoq, leaning his head on his hands. "He calls himself French, but no one knows his real origin, and there is no reason why he shouldn't have been born in England, especially as he served there in the police and talks English like an Englishman. Why shouldn't he be the son of Sophia Nesley, granddaughter of Anna O'Sullivan?"

After asking himself this question, M. Lecoq began studying the statement before him, and after a new examination, muttered : "No, it is impossible ; Sophia Nesley was born in 1822. Tolbiac is nearly fifty years old. He cannot be that woman's son." And he relapsed into discouraging uncertainty.

His meditations were interrupted by the entrance of Piéouche, who had already become a blackamoor again. He had quickly rid himself of Cambremer, but not without promising him wonders from the intervention of Father Vinet. He had then taken a cab, and alighting on the boulevard had slipped into the hotel, and, after a series of dexterous marches and counter-marches, reached the nabob's apartment. He always carried a key of this apartment in his pocket, and not to disturb M. Lecoq unnecessarily he had gone straight to the room he had reserved for disguising purposes, and had proceeded to a prompt and complete transformation. In twenty minutes he was ready to accompany the Nabob of Bahour anywhere, and so now he softly entered the drawing-room.

"Well?" said M. Lecoq to him.

"Well, sir, you have seen my man and you have read his papers. Is it sufficiently clear, eh?" exclaimed Piéouche.

"What is clear is that the little one belongs to the O'Sullivan family, and that she has been carried off, but that is all."

"That's all for the moment, but when we know who did it, we sha'n't be far from the end."

"And how are we to know that?"

"My faith, I believe I know it already. No one will get it out of my head but what it's Tolbiac."

"That's your idea—it is perhaps mine—but it is not certain."

"Then who would you have it be, sir? Isn't he an old offender? Don't you believe that he had the mute abducted in a carriage in the same way as Cambremer's little one was abducted yesterday? Abduction is a trick of his. And then, you know very well that I lost him the other day at the Orleans station, and that the child was taken out of Paris by the Barrière d'Italie. Tolbiac must have a place in that direction, in a suburb or still further. Without taking into account that the Englishwoman's servant went in the same train as he did. That is a proof, I fancy, and it wouldn't astonish me but what it was she who played the fine lady and came after the little one."

"All that you tell me there, I have already said to myself, and, indeed, I am quite disposed to act as though we were right. My plan is made, and may be to-morrow I shall commence the campaign. I shall decide this evening when I have seen Tolbiac, who is to be at the opera, and who will come to my box to give me news respecting the search undertaken by M. Holtz, the agent he personates. According to what he tells me, I shall

act, and if he tells me certain things which I expect, you can get ready to travel with me for several days."

"Where to, patron?"

"I will tell you that after we return from the opera. Let us start; Tolbiac will be getting impatient."

XXVII.

PIÉDOUCHE observed the custom of Oriental servants with his employer. To hear is to obey; such was his motto, and he always executed the orders of the Nabob of Bahour without permitting himself the least remark. And he did so without an effort, for he had absolute confidence in the judgment and ability of Father Lecoq. He thought himself his equal as to the little details of the profession, but he recognised his immense superiority in all pertaining to the direction of an affair. He also confined himself to modestly enumerating facts, leaving them fully to his wisdom, so that he might draw his deductions and decide knotty points. Now the nabob desired to go at once to the opera. So the attendant had only to follow his illustrious master and to wait till their return from the theatre to learn his intentions.

The new Opera-House being close to the Grand Hotel, M. Lecoq went there on foot, to the great delight of the loiterers on the boulevard. His robe and turban subjected him to the annoyance of being stared at, and even followed. But he was accustomed to this little manifestation, and it barely troubled him. Neither did Piédouche mind it, although in the crowd he saw more than one face with which he formerly had business. His own was unrecognisable under the paint with which he had just covered it, and no one would have suspected that the handsome black servant had been born at Pantin, near Paris.

Piédouche had, then, nothing to fear from casual meetings, and yet, just before reaching the corner of the Place de l'Opéra, he had a surprise which might well have disconcerted him. In the front rank of the inquisitive folks who crowded around his master's pathway as he walked along, there suddenly appeared Jean Galoupiat and his wife. He had left them some two hours before after dining with them at the Feu Eternel, but had received no news from them. The repast had been plentifully moistened, as usual, for Piédouche did everything in good style, and the husband and wife, feeling quite gay, had announced their intention of promenading a little before returning to the shop in the Rue de l'Arbalète. So it was not astonishing that they were still about, although they were in the habit of going to bed with the chickens; but Piédouche asked himself why they were so far from their own neighbourhood.

The bargain between him and them required them to beat about the Champs Elysées and the Bois de Boulogne every day, from three o'clock till seven, for the purpose of finding the Englishwoman's missing servant. This bargain they executed conscientiously, and congratulated themselves greatly on having closed with it; but, as a rule, their zeal did not carry them so far as to continue their search after sunset. Had they been attracted by the brilliancy of the lights which blazed on the gilded front of the Opera-House? or by a desire to contemplate this Grand Hotel which sheltered the nabob whose generosity fell upon them in such profusion? What is certain is, that they contemplated the nabob himself with great earnestness, and

that they knew it was their benefactor who passed before them. Piédouche watched them out of the corner of his eye, and saw them mutually elbowing each other and exchanging hurried remarks in a low tone. They paid no attention to him, however, not suspecting for a moment that this Indian, black as the coal they sold, was the same man who had but just now treated them to an abundant dinner, and had sung for them during dessert.

M. Lecoq did not notice these Auvergnats, who were unknown to him ; but ex-number 29 did not lose them from sight the whole time they were crossing the Place. They followed the nabob obstinately, pointing at him with their fingers, and evidently talking about him. Jeanette pushed her husband from time to time as though she was urging him to get nearer to the prince, and perhaps even to speak to him. "It is to be hoped that my coal people wont be foolish enough to accost the patron before everybody in the street," thought Piédouche. "They have recognised him, that's plain, for they saw him at the Assize Court, and, besides, I told them that he lived at the Grand Hotel, and they have just seen him come out. But what fly is stinging them to make them hang around him like that? Do they want an explanation from him? No ; they receive their money every day, and they can want nothing more. All the same, I did wrong to tell them that the prince spoke French. Bah ! They wouldn't dare to come and pull him by the sleeve, and, besides, we are close to the steps leading to the door of the opera."

M. Lecoq was about to set his foot on the first step when a fresh idea occurred to Piédouche.

"Who knows, after all, but what they have found the servant," he said to himself. "A chance may have brought them face to face with her in their neighbourhood, near the railway station. They must have followed her—she no doubt crossed the water—for she must live on this side ; they probably followed her to the door of her house, as it was agreed they should, and then they no doubt reflected that they would not see me till to-morrow evening, and came prowling around the Grand Hotel to see if they could not meet me. They have been zealous. Yes," he continued, "that must be it. And they must have recognised the patron in the Indian prince, and were urging each other to speak to him." And the good fellow asked himself : "Suppose I let them do so ? Or, rather, suppose I beckon to them ? No, that would be too dangerous. Here we are before the door. There are thirty people round us who are about to enter the vestibule, and who look at the governor as they would at some curious animal. It would seem strange to them to see him chatting with the coal-dealer and his wife. And then, if they had taken pains to wash themselves, it wouldn't have been so bad. But over there I see two officers who used to serve with me, and who are watching the public. They will make their report this evening. The nabob and his attendant would be followed. No, thank you ; it will be better for us to wait twenty-four hours before we hear the news."

Piédouche kept all these reflections to himself, for he was anxious to play his rôle becomingly, and it would have been exceedingly out of place for the attendant of the Nabob of Bahour to take the liberty of engaging publicly in conversation with his master, whom he followed at a distance of three paces. So he determined to cross the threshold of the theatre ; not, however, without giving a last glance in the direction of the Galoupiats, who had remained at the foot of the steps.

He saw that Jeanette commenced to flutter about, and gesticulate, while

Jean tried to pacify her, and that finally they were about to go away as they had come. It was then he regretted having entered the skin of a negro. If he had still been dressed as the little citizen of the Rue de Lappe, nothing would have been easier than to go up to them and ask the news; but what means had he of reaching them since he had turned Asiatic from head to foot?

The Auvergnats knew very well that the nabob was acquainted with their affair, as it was he who paid them through the agency of the man who treated them to dinner every day, but they had never heard of the black attendant; and, prudence being one of their chief qualities, they would certainly have refused to give him the least information. Besides, this attendant would be compromised almost as much as his master by conversing with them in public. They would be in a crowd, and as he passed for not understanding a word of French, the people of the Grand Hotel who might happen to be there would have good reason for being astonished. Neither could he think of going out and changing his costume during the performance, for it was necessary for him to remain there to escort his prince on his return. And, besides, he would not have had time to go to and fro so many times, to say nothing about the two transformations of skin and clothing to be accomplished. Piédouche tried to console himself with the thought that perhaps the Galoupiats had only come there from curiosity, and that in any case he would know all about it the next evening. The nabob had engaged a lower side box, and as he entered, the curtain had just risen on the fourth act of the "Huguenots." The poniards were being blessed, and the sounds produced by the splendid and tremendous chorus made the house tremble. The spectators, held by this magnificent melody, did not turn to look at the nabob, who was thus able to take his seat in front of his box without attracting much attention. He profited by this respite accorded to him by inquisitive opera-glasses to look around him, and it was not long ere he espied M. Tolbiac and the beautiful Disney seated in the amphitheatre.

XXVIII.

ARABELLA DISNEY displayed an elegant toilette and some flashing diamonds. Tolbiac was in the correct dress of a man of the best society. They seemed, however, to have but little taste for Meyerbeer's beautiful music, for they chatted together with considerable animation.

M. Lecoq, on his side, listened far less to the chorus singing of the approaching massacre of the Huguenots than he looked at the English woman and her cavalier. For him the drama was in the amphitheatre and not on the stage, for the more he reflected, the more he fortified himself in the conviction that the affair of the O'Sullivan inheritance was closely connected with the crimes of the Rue de l'Arbalète.

Piédouche, straight as a log of ebony and motionless as a statue, kept himself in the rear of the box, but sufficiently near to his master to be able to speak to him in a low tone without being overheard by the spectators around them.

"Tolbiac has not seen me yet," said Father Lecoq to himself. "If he knew that I was looking at him he wouldn't prattle so much with that creature. What can he have to tell her that is so interesting? Something in connection with the inheritance, no doubt; for even admitting that he is not acting on his own account, it is clear that he has a pecuniary interest

in finding the heir, and Arabella is no doubt his partner. Presently they will see me, and between the acts he will come here. The question is, to know what he will tell me. If he informs me that the last O'Sullivan has been found, I will let him go on, and when he has presented him to me, I will venture to bring forward Madame Lecomte and the workman's daughter. If, on the contrary, he comes to tell me that M. Holtz is not yet quite sure on the point in question, that there is some delay, and that he will give me an answer in a few days, then my mind is made up, and I shall know what to do."

In the meanwhile, the last strains of the poniard blessing were being thundered forth by the chorus, supported by the brass instruments of the orchestra. Piédouche profited by this hurricane of harmony to say to his master : "There is perhaps some news, sir. Just now, while crossing the Place, I saw the coal-dealer and his wife. They were looking at you, and acted as though they wanted to speak to you."

"We shall have to see if they are still there when we go out," replied M. Lecoq, without turning round.

"And if they are there?"

"Accompany me to the hotel, change your disguise quickly and go out on to the Place, and try and find them."

"That will be difficult, sir; especially to return to the hotel at one o'clock in the morning dressed like a citizen of the Rue de Lappe. I should be noticed in the passages."

"Be quiet ; Tolbiac is looking at me with his opera-glasses. He must not see us chatting together."

Piédouche did not open his mouth again, but kept himself at a distance in a still more respectful attitude. Indeed, Tolbiac, after looking all over the theatre through his glasses, had just perceived the nabob. He hastened to lower his glasses, and bowed most graciously to the Nabob of Bahour. The latter also remarked that he nudged the beautiful Disney, who was seated beside him, and that this elegant person replied with a significant glance. He returned the salute and assumed his most Asiatic air—that is to say, the most serious and most impassive one he could, affecting to listen with earnest attention to the imprecations hurled forth by the chorus singers. However, he was watching out of the corner of his eye what took place in the amphitheatre seats, and was somewhat surprised to see M. Tolbiac de Tinchebray abruptly leave his place and go out without his companion, who, however, did not appear at all disturbed by his departure.

"He is coming to my box, that's clear," thought M. Lecoq. "He has, then, something very important to tell me, that he doesn't wait till the end of the act. We shall soon know, however, and I will behave discreetly."

Piédouche had seen nothing, but kept himself quiet in his corner. A few minutes later the door opened, and M. Tolbiac entered cautiously. The nabob received him with the mingled politeness and dignity of a grandee who has been disturbed in his pleasure, but who, nevertheless, chooses to be courteous. The detective sat down with perfect freedom, and, without the least embarrassment, began a little introductory speech in an unrestrained voice : "Your excellency will excuse me," he said, "for coming and disturbing you during the performance. I felt that I must speak with you this evening, and Arabella, desiring to leave before the end of the opera, I shall be obliged to escort her home."

"What!" exclaimed the nabob, feigning astonishment, "Madame Disney voluntarily deprives herself of the pleasure of listening to this masterpiece

to the end? That is what it is to be surfeited with the enjoyments which artless strangers like myself take endless delight in."

"But it seems to me, excellency," replied Tolbiac, smiling, "that you missed three-fourths of the performance this evening."

"Much against my will, I assure you; I was detained by a visit from one of my compatriots who arrived this evening from India, and brought me letters of importance from my steward at Bahour. But Madame Disney had not, probably, the same reasons as myself, and I—"

"She has others, excellency. Arabella is obliged to start for London early to-morrow morning, and it is a great affair for a woman to have to rise at seven o'clock."

"Ah, sir, what do you tell me? Are we threatened with the loss of so charming a person? Has she the intention of returning to England to remain there always?"

"Oh, not at all. She is only going to make a little excursion which will not detain her more than a week. And—she takes me with her."

"What! you go too? Two items of bad news at the same time."

"No one could be more gracious, and I am very sensible to the regret you express. I beg you to believe that I should have been glad to have dispensed with this journey, for I abhor London, and appreciate still more the charm of residing in Paris since I have the honour of meeting you there; but can one oppose the wishes of a pretty woman? Besides, I have myself certain interests to look after on the other side of the Channel, so that I am not going merely for pleasure. But, allow me, excellency, to say a few words to you respecting the affair you have at heart—the search for the heirs of Major O'Sullivan."

"It is progressing nicely, it seems to me, and I can only thank you for the service you have rendered me in sending me that agent. He has told me that he was on the track, and he is coming one of these days to give me a decisive answer."

"I saw him to-day. He has not dared to come to see you because he has not yet made the progress he hoped. He is a conscientious fellow, and exceedingly anxious to do what is right. He came, then, to beg of me to tell you that he shall not go to the Grand Hotel till he can bring you positive proof of the existence of the heirs you seek."

"And does he think he will require much more time?"

"On my return it will be accomplished."

"Then you will bring him to see me yourself," said the nabob, looking fixedly at the detective.

"Or I will send him to you," replied M. Tolbiac without flinching. "He is somewhat umbrageous, and likes to be alone when he meets his clients. If he came to me this morning, it was because he did not wish to disturb you at a time when he knew that it was not your custom to receive visitors. Now, he has to start this afternoon on a journey connected with the search you have charged him with."

"It is abroad, then, that the major's only surviving heir is to be found?"

"I don't think so. Holtz told me nothing definite on the point, for he is very reserved, but he led me to understand that it was rather in France—in the country—that the search would have to be made."

The nabob was about to follow up this point, but, although the talkers had lowered their voices, the murmur of their conversation disturbed their neighbours, and repeated exclamations of "hush!" reminded them that the place and time were badly chosen for discussing business matters. The

scene of the dramatic duet between Raoul and Valentine had been reached, and the tenor rendered in a vibrating voice the affecting passage in the last appeal he addresses to his mistress :—

“ Le danger presse et le temps vole
Laisse moi, laisse moi partir.”

M. Tolbiac did not do like Raoul, who sings instead of going away. He contented himself with briefly renewing his excuses to the nabob, and glided out of the box after saying to his noble friend, “ In a week, excellency, we shall meet again.”

XXIX.

M. Lecoq did not try to detain Tolbiac. It would have been time wasted, and, besides, the rôle he played did not permit him to insist. On assuming the character of a nabob, he had condemned himself to impassibility, and was forbidden to interest himself too earnestly in a money matter, no matter what it might be. Moreover, Tolbiac had told him quite enough to give him something to exercise the sagacity of his mind and draw conclusions from.

He turned in the direction of the amphitheatre, expecting that Tolbiac would return to his seat there ; but he perceived that the beautiful Disney had disappeared. While her gallant cavalier was taking leave of the Nabob of Bahour, she had risen and left the auditorium. According to all appearance, Tolbiac had met her in the passage and escorted her out of the theatre.

Such haste to leave was truly extraordinary. It looked as though the couple had merely attended the opera to furnish Tolbiac with a pretext for acquainting the nabob with the delay in the Holtz operations, and then leaving at once without waiting for his noble friend the Indian prince. That they were really going away was not to be doubted ; for the detective was not foolish enough to invent a useless story, but that he was really going to London was another question.

On this point, M. Lecoq already had a very decided opinion which he proposed to communicate to Piédouche. He only asked himself if he ought to remain till the end of the performance, take time to mature his plans before giving his orders to his faithful ally, or leave at once at the risk of meeting Tolbiac in the vestibule. The detective might be astonished that Lord Djafer, who professed to love the music of the “ Huguenots ” so passionately, had not patience to listen to it till the end of the fourth act.

However, at this moment, Raoul renewed his moving appeal :—

“ Ce sont mes frères qu'on immole—
Laisse-moi, laisse-moi partir.”

Did the father of the condemned man take these words as a sort of warning ? It is probable, for he rose abruptly and said to Piédouche in a low tone : “ Let us go. There are people who are in danger and who need us. We must not keep them waiting.”

The attendant asked no better than to leave. He had no taste for grand music, and found no amusement in the box. Besides, he was thinking all the time about the Galoupiats, and was not sorry of an opportunity to see if they were still on the Place outside ; so he followed his master right willingly. The nabob’s exit was effected without any kind of incident. Tolbiac

had been diligent, and was not to be seen either on the grand staircase or at the entrance of the opera-house. The Auvergnats had also disappeared to Piédouche's great disappointment.

On reaching their apartment at the Grand Hotel, the nabob turned to his attendant and earnestly remarked, "I see through it now. The scoundrel has betrayed himself."

"What has he told you, then?" asked Piédouche, who had only caught an occasional word of the conversation held in the box.

"He told me that the heir would be found in a week's time, because he needs a week to rid himself of a young girl and a child who are in his way. He told me that he was going to start to-morrow for England, because, so as to reach his ends, he is obliged to disappear for a week; but he won't cross the Channel—that I am sure of. Where is he going? I don't know yet, but I must know as soon as possible, for I have not a minute to lose to save Mademoiselle Lecomte."

"You think it was he who attempted yesterday to—"

"I'm sure of it. He didn't succeed and he will try again."

"Then it was very likely he who stole little Marthe Cambremer as well?"

"There is no doubt of it. They are both heiresses, and he wants to make away with them before he produces his heir, just as he made away with Mary Fassitt."

"In your opinion he murdered the Englishwoman, then?"

"Or he had her murdered, which amounts to the same thing."

"Dash it! governor, but all we have to do is to go and find the chief of the investigation service and tell him what has happened. That will be enough to get M. Louis out of the scrape."

"If I did that I should be locked up at once, and Louis would have nothing to hope for. I should be accused of intriguing to prove his innocence, and they would hold him responsible for his father's conduct. Don't you understand, that I am convinced, but that I have no proofs, and that I must have them before I interfere? You know that a sentence is never annulled unless the party who is really guilty is condemned in his turn for the same crime. It is the only case the Code has made provision for. The two sentences then become irreconcilable, as they say, and the first pronounced is rendered void. We are not there yet, my poor friend. Tolbiac will not be sent to the assizes merely because he is engaged in connection with the O'Sullivan inheritance. He would not even be arrested."

"The devil! but then I don't see how we can catch him."

"I will tell you how. In my opinion Tolbiac somewhere has a place where he operates at his ease; as it were, a workshop where he manufactures his rascalities, and this place is not in Paris. It is there that he has sent Cambremer's daughter; it is there he wished to send Mademoiselle Lecomte—dead or alive, I don't know, but it would amount to the same thing. And if he is the assassin of the Rue de l'Arbalète, it is there that he was going to send the trunk containing the body of the murdered woman."

"Why, yes, indeed the police officers testified that just as they collared the mute a carriage started off in the direction of the Boulevard d'Italie."

"And the carriage which carried away little Marthe crossed the Place d'Italie also."

"The villain was probably going to that same place when I lost him at the Orleans station."

"Of course! And he was with Mary Fassitt's servant."

"That's sure, for the Auvergnats recognised her."

"But I say, sir, suppose it was the same woman he brought with him to the opera this evening."

"Then we should be very near the end. But I doubt it. However, that will be easily verified not later than to-morrow. Listen to me attentively. You will begin by disguising yourself the same as you were a little while ago, that is as a citizen of small means, and then you will try and leave the hotel without attracting attention. It is not very late yet; you could pass out. You will then go straight to the Rue Godot and mount guard before Tolbiac's door. He will only have to-night to clear out, so we must take all precautions. I think, however, that he will not leave till to-morrow morning. In that case, as soon as daylight appears, you must hire a cab by the hour and install yourself in it two doors off. When Tolbiac comes out you will tell your driver to follow him. Don't repeat the folly of the other day. I have an idea that he will go to the Boulevard Haussmann after his lady friend, and that they will then proceed together to the Orleans railway-station. Manage so as to reach the ticket-office at the same time as they do, take your ticket for the same station, and don't leave them till you are sure that they have reached their destination. If they go first-class, you go second, and when you get out arrange matters so that they sha'n't notice you."

"Rest easy, governor. A man knows how to follow, and Tolbiac won't fool me twice running."

"I count on that. When you have seen them home, you will take the first train back to Paris; you will then pass by the Rue de l'Arbalète to chat with the Auvergnats and ask them if there is anything new; you will tell them that you will not go to dine in the evening at the Feu Eternel, and, finally, you will come back here and report matters. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir, and if we miss that rascal of a Tolbiac this time, it won't be my fault."

Having said this, Piédouche went out to begin disguising himself without delay, while M. Lecoq threw himself on a divan, took his head in his hands, and murmured: "My God! grant that I may not be mistaken!"

XXX.

A QUARTER of an hour after receiving his instructions, Piédouche, again at tired as a citizen, slipped out of the Grand Hotel to fulfil the task assigned him by his employer.

M. Lecoq, as may well be believed, did not sleep. He passed the night in again studying the memorandum left with him by Cambremer, and in weighing the chances which still remained to him. He fully expected to succeed, and did not doubt that Tolbiac was, if not the principal, at least an accomplice in the crime of the Rue de l'Arbalète. But what great difficulties there were to overcome before he would be able to clearly prove the part taken by this man, and place him so that it would be impossible for him to deny his guilt, and escape justice. The task would have made the most able detective recoil, and M. Lecoq himself would not have been equal to it if he had not been sustained by the love he bore his son. And, after thoroughly sifting the reasons which had led him to believe that Tolbiac was guilty, after looking at the affair from every point of view, he perceived

an objection which had not before presented itself to his mind. If it were admitted and even demonstrated that Mary Fassitt's murder was not isolated, but was connected with a series of other crimes all having one and the same cause, how on the other hand could one explain the murder of M. Lheureux, the merchant who had been killed in the dining-room at the cottage?

This merchant had nothing in common with the O'Sullivan family. What interest could Tolbiac have had in getting rid of him? And if it were not Tolbiac, it was then another who had dealt him his death-blow. Then the defects, contradictions, and improbabilities of the system of defence M. Lecoq had been preparing so laboriously to save the condemned man became apparent to him; and overwhelmed by the weight of the appearances which so strongly accused his innocent son, saddened and almost discouraged, he prayed God to throw light on this dark mystery.

He had determined to await the return of Piédouche without taking any repose, and to act without delay as soon as he had his faithful follower's report. He employed the time which remained to him in arranging the details of a preconceived plan, and in writing to Mademoiselle Lecomte. He thought it indispensable to remind her that he had not forgotten her lover, and especially to warn her to be on her guard against the dangers which threatened her. His letter, very short and very concise, was so written that Thérèse would perfectly well know whom it came from, and would consider it seriously without any one else, not excepting Madame Lecomte, being able to understand the hidden meaning and repeat it. He beseeched the young girl not to venture out of the house until she received news from her friend—the last word was underscored; and he exhorted her earnestly not to be discouraged, for the day of deliverance was at hand.

M. Lecoq had just finished his note with this significant sentence, and the morning was well advanced, when Piédouche suddenly entered his master's presence without having troubled to change his costume.

The false nabob had calculated that ex-number 29 would not come back till much later, and his hurried return betokened no good. "Well?" he asked, with disquietude.

"Ah! sir," exclaimed Piédouche, "I believe the devil interferes in this, I have been served in the same way again."

"What! you have let him escape?"

"No; I arrived too late."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the bird had already flown when I reached the Rue Godot."

"That isn't possible, unless you lost time in going there."

"Not a minute. I had no trouble in getting out of the hotel, and once on the boulevard I made but one bound to Tolbiac's house. I didn't expect to meet him, because I fancied he was already indoors, nor did I expect him to go out during the night, but I relied on his leaving early in the morning to take the first train. So I waited for daylight, loitering on the sidewalk. Nothing. The door did not even open once. They are a very sedate lot of people that live in that house. Just about five o'clock I called a cabman who was going to the stand on the Place de la Madeleine. He had a fresh horse, for he had just left the stable. I said to myself: 'That will just suit me when it becomes necessary to follow the scoundrel. I jumped into the cab and let it stop in front of the house opposite. The place was a good one for seeing any one who went in and came out. I waited an hour; no one. At a

quarter-past six the concierge came out to sweep the sidewalk, and Tolbiac's groom, in his slippers, dragged himself as far as the wine-shop at the corner. That seemed strange to me, and I said to myself: 'If Tolbiac were going away, his lackey wouldn't give himself a holiday. He must be going to stay.' Then, my faith, as I didn't want to remain there uselessly, since I knew you were waiting for me, I told my cabman to drive five or six doors farther off and then I got out. The concierge was still sweeping. I approached him quietly and accosted him, to ask at what time I could speak to M. Tolbiac. 'It won't be to-day nor to-morrow,' he said to me; 'for he went away into the country last night, and will not be back till next week.' On that I said to myself: Good! he can't have returned home, he must have gone to the Englishwoman's, and they will leave together at seven o'clock. The Boulevard Haussmann is two steps from here, I have yet time. I gave the address to the coachman, and arrived at half past six in front of the Englishwoman's door. There I didn't have to take the trouble to ask for information. Her own maid was chatting on the sidewalk with the concierge, and I heard him say to her: 'So your mistress has gone into the country again.' And the maid answered him: 'Yes, she went away last evening, after the opera, and she told me she would be gone five or six days. I'm quite delighted. I shall be able to go and have a good time of it at Asnières.' After that I knew enough. I asked the concierge for some imaginary name, and he replied that he knew no such person. Then I told my cabby to drive me to the boulevard, and—"

"And after the opera!" repeated M. Lecoq. "So that was why they left so early! They had a carriage waiting for them."

"That is just what I think."

"Why didn't you come and tell me what you had learned at once?"

"Why, sir, it is because I went on as far as the Rue de l'Arbalète, as you ordered me; and I went there on foot. A cab attracts too much attention in that neighbourhood. I found the coal-people, I made them talk, and I learned some news. Do you know why they were so anxious to talk to you on the Place de l'Opéra? It was because they had just seen Mary Fassitt's servant enter the theatre."

"With Tolbiac?" asked M. Lecoq, quickly.

"No, sir; all alone. But in full dress, with diamonds and laces and so on."

"And they waited for her to come out, I hope?"

"Ah, that's the mischief. It seems that Jeannette, the woman, wanted to stay, but her man wouldn't do it. So they left. Ah, I talked to them, governor; I gave them a good blowing up. But it doesn't alter the fact that they missed the opportunity, the fools."

"It is written then that we are to have everything against us," said Louis's father, bitterly.

"It won't last for always, sir. As long as the woman we seek went to the opera yesterday, she will go there again, that's sure. I rowed Galoupiat. I told him that if you knew of last night's blunder, you wouldn't pay him any more, and that it would be nothing more than he deserved, for no one had a right to be so stupid as that. In short, sir, I roused him thoroughly, and he swore to me that every opera night he would go and post himself at the door and watch all who went in and came out."

"And you think that we can rely on him?"

"Oh, he'll sleep every night on the steps of the theatre rather than lose

the three thousand francs I promised him on your behalf. And if he worked badly yesterday, it was because he had had a drop too much. I also told him that I should pay for no more dinners for him at the Feu Eternel. And see, sir, why we were so unlucky. It seems that he didn't dare to speak to you because he was afraid of your negro. If he had known, the stupid, that the negro was I."

"That would have been much worse," interrupted M. Lecoq. "Listen, Piédoche, don't let us lament any longer over the blunders which have been committed, but let us occupy ourselves with repairing them. It is not by remaining here that we shall do so. Go and get me the railway guide which is on the table in my study."

XXXI.

PIÉDOUCHE obeyed at once, although he was somewhat surprised by the order. He did not at all understand how a railway guide could help them, when what they needed was to find the assassin of the Rue de l'Arbalète.

However, M. Lecoq knew very well what use he wished to make of this time-table. "My boy," he said, in a determined manner, "it is time to act. All that we have done up to the present has not been useless, for I have learned many things it was necessary for me to know, but it is nothing in comparison to what we are about to undertake. You will help me, but we shall go separately. So I must acquaint you thoroughly with what I am going to attempt and explain my whole plan to you."

"Go on, governor, I won't lose a word, and will do everything so as to please you."

"Listen, in the first place, to the reason on which I base my actions. A man cannot properly execute what he imperfectly understands, so I wish you to understand me fully. Yesterday I said to you, and you were of my opinion, that Tolbiac must have a place outside Paris."

"That is as clear as daylight, and at the present time he is there."

"Is it a house in a town or a village? Is it a villa?" continued M. Lecoq. "I know nothing about it, but what I do know is that one can get there by the Orleans railway line."

"Yes, for I saw him show a ticket at the station."

"And the train by which he travelled on that day went as far as Orleans, so it is between Orleans and Paris we must search."

"Correct, sir."

"But Tolbiac could also go there in a carriage, for it is evident that he was taken there in a carriage yesterday after the opera, considering that he left the theatre at midnight, and that no more trains leave the Orleans station at that hour."

"That is true."

"Then Tolbiac does not go very far from Paris. If he went in a cab I should say that he went no further than the immediate suburbs; but nothing shows that he uses a cab; on the contrary, it seems to me almost certain that he uses a private carriage, not his Paris one, probably, for he is too prudent to admit his coachman into the secret of his little journeys."

"Especially as he hires this coachman by the month, and that the livery-stable keeper wouldn't like his horse to be used up by going into the country."

"That is evident. We must then admit that a carriage is sent to him

from down there, which belongs either to him or to his—what shall I say?—to his partner; a carriage which comes to Paris with him, and which brings him, not to the Rue Godot, but to some distant neighbourhood, near the Place d'Italie, for instance."

"I have an idea that little Cambremer was carried off in the carriage you are talking about?"

"You go too fast. We shall get to that, but let me follow my argument. According to all appearances, Tolbiac, on leaving the opera last night, and fearing that he would be followed, got into a cab with the Englishwoman, and was taken to the place where he was awaited by the carriage which was to carry him and the woman the rest of the way on their nocturnal journey."

"Good! I see that from here. They had themselves set down at the corner of a street. Fifteen steps on foot. The corner of a street to turn. The brougham's there. And then, whip up your horses, coachey."

"Now then, how far can a horse, two horses if you like, go in one trip without being overdriven?"

"Pigache, who served in the artillery train, could tell you that better than I, but as a rough guess, I should say that a good horse could easily get over ten to twelve leagues a day. But to do that the beast would have to eat and rest on the way."

"Tolbiac, I think, travels at night and not by day, and in the night horses tire quicker. Besides, it is to be supposed that he doesn't amuse himself with stopping at the taverns, which, however, do not remain open at night-time, since there are no longer either diligences or post-chaises. Let us see, then, about what distance could two vigorous, well-fed beasts cover without eating or taking breath?"

"Well, that depends. Five, six leagues, seven at a push. But it would be severe if done often. Three or four—that would be easy."

"And for less than three or four it is to be presumed that Tolbiac would never take the railroad. Choisy-le-Roi, which is the first station, is only ten kilomètres from Paris, that is true, but I don't think that he goes to Choisy-le-Roi. If he went there, the woman who carried Marthe Cambremer away would not have brought that name forward. Ablon, which comes next, is fifteen kilomètres distant; that is to say about four leagues. I resume and I conclude that we need only search between four and eight leagues from Paris for the place where Tolbiac goes."

"On the Orleans road, it is understood?"

"On the road, or near the road. He may get out at a station and go from there on foot, on horseback, or in a carriage to his house, his villa, or his farm. Well, let us take as our basis the railroad as far as eight leagues from Paris. This brings us to Bretigny, which is precisely thirty-two kilomètres off. Before Bretigny and after Choisy, we have six stations: Ablon, Athis, Juvisy, Savigny, Epinay and Saint Michel. It ought to be at one of those six that Tolbiac stops, either to remain there or to go either to the right or left of the line, but not very far probably."

"Then, sir, you mean to visit all that part of the country?"

"And the surroundings within a radius of from ten to twelve kilomètres."

"That's all very well, only—"

"What?"

"If you travel as an Indian prince, and I as a black attendant, all the village will be in a hubbub, and we shall be announced two hours before we arrive, so that—"

"Don't talk foolishly. I want to discover Tolbiac's secret. He has seen me as a nabob. I'm not fool enough to show myself in a costume he knows."

"Then we disguise ourselves?"

"That is indispensable."

"And how shall we disguise ourselves?"

"I have reflected over it, and considered it thoroughly, and I have decided that I shall become a commercial traveller, while you will be a pedlar."

"We don't travel together, then?"

"Together? No; but to the same locality on the same day. I will explain my idea to you: The best way to procure information in towns is to chat with the tavern-keepers. And the best way to procure information in the country is to chat with the women. I take charge of the towns, and give you charge of the country places. That's the programme and this is the way we will carry it out: I reach the first station—we will do the same at all six—I arrive by the railway—and go to the best hotel. You arrive an hour earlier, or later on foot, with your pack on your back, and go and lodge at a truckman's tavern. I go to the fine houses in the neighbourhood to recommend my wines—I have chosen wine, because one can go anywhere to sell that commodity—while you go from door to door and offer your cotton, needles and so on. It must be well understood that whenever we meet in the street, we must not recognise each other. Only, every evening, at ten o'clock precisely, I shall amuse myself by strolling round the church—there is always a church and it is always easy to find. You come at the same time and saunter round there also. We chat; you tell me what you have learned, and according to the information we have gathered I give you orders either to start for the next town, or, on the contrary, send you to the farms and villas in the neighbourhood, and prolong my own stay."

"It is understood, governor, of course, I shall need a licence as pedlar, and a licence indorsed at the Prefecture. But our friend Pigache will procure me that during the day."

"I have my own affair. Some invoices, letterheads and price-lists of the firm of Rawson, Jenkins & Company of Liverpool. Jenkins is a friend of mine. I once caught a cashier of his who had carried off ten thousand pounds sterling belonging to him. He does a large business in Spanish and Portuguese wines."

"And so you won't be bothered by the other commercial travellers. They are shrewd, but they don't know the English firms."

"Rest easy—I know how to talk to those fellows. We have not a minute to lose, so don't let us lose one. I am going to inform the hotel people that I start this evening for Le Havre, but that I retain my apartment. "Remain as you are—you will arrange yourself as a negro this evening—and run and buy me the clothing and the portmanteau I shall need. Take a complete traveller's costume to my place in the Rue de la Roquette, and place the other garments in the portmanteau which you will take later on to the Orleans station. Tell the coachman to come to the Rue Scribe for us at half-past seven. He will be directed to take us to the Saint Lazare station, but instead of doing so, he must drive us to the Boulevard de Ménilmontant. He will take my trunks, belonging to me as a nabob, to his house and keep them for me. You will disguise yourself on the way—it doesn't take long to enter the skin of a pedlar; but as I

need to be a little careful in my dress, I will make my toilette in the apartment of Father Vinet. And so to-morrow morning, my old Piédouche, we shall start, and may God direct us."

XXXII.

THREE days after the decisive interview between Piédouche and M. Lecoq in the apartment at the Grand Hotel, the master and his faithful servant were fully on their way. All had gone as could be wished on leaving the hotel, and in assuming the new characters chosen by the old detective.

The plan having been conceived, Piédouche was without his equal for carrying out his orders with intelligence and celerity. The day after their pretended departure for Havre, the nabob had changed himself into a commercial traveller, and the attendant had become a pedlar. Djafer, Nabob of Bahour, now called himself Aristide Chalumet; Ali's name was Pierre Paladru. They each possessed papers in due form, papers showing that M. Aristide Chalumet represented the firm of Rawson & Jenkins for the sale of wines, and that Pierre Paladru born at Bourg d'Oisans, in the department of the Isère, was authorised to peddle miscellaneous goods in all parts of France. And nothing in their appearance, either in dress or manners contradicted the description given in their passports.

Piédouche had known how to assume the head, physiognomy and manners of a mountaineer of Dauphiné. He had formerly been on a secret mission to Grenoble, and knew enough of the country to be able to talk about it if necessary. He knew the price of cotton, needles, handkerchiefs, and writing-paper on his finger-tips, and possessed the art of selling almost as well as the more difficult one of making people talk. Moreover, he was not embarrassed either with servants or gendarmes.

Father Lecoq had easily made himself look younger by about twenty years, but he took good care not to exaggerate the character he had adopted. From among all the types of commercial travellers which overrun the world, he had chosen the one which best became his age, habits and character. M. Aristide Chalumet was a serious man, and yet a thorough good fellow; a traveller, calmed by experience, who had gained a competency if not a fortune; who did business in a lofty manner, and yet knew how to conform to circumstances, and make himself agreeable to his customers; a man who was easy and jovial with tavern-keepers and tradesmen, but dignified and polite with citizens of higher standing. He had remained a Frenchman, and even a Parisian in a certain way, but to uphold his title as the representative of a Liverpool firm, he sometimes affected a slight English accent, and even a little stiffness of manner. He had thus created a kind of British Gaudisart,* a double sided rôle which enabled him to show himself according to circumstances, under one or the other aspect, now as a diplomat, now as a jester. He had in a valise some short tweed-coats, checked trousers, and coloured shirts; but in his leather trunk, marked with his initials, there were white cravats and a black dress suit.

However, in spite of the skilful transformations of the general and the soldier, as Lecoq and Piédouche may be called, the first two days of the campaign gave no satisfaction to the two explorers. Ablon is nothing but a hamlet, Athis is not of much more importance, and the two places almost join each other. One day had sufficed for exploring all Ablon, Athis, and

*The famous type of a successful intriguer immortalized by Honoré de Balzac.—[TRANS.]

their environs. M. Lecoq had sought for information at the various taverns, decorated with the name of hotels, where he had stopped for a few hours, and was as positive as possible that it was not in this neighbourhood that he need make a search; and the information brought to him by Piédouche in the evening, behind the church at Athis, had only confirmed that opinion.

At Juvisy, the next halting-place, nothing fresh had been learned. The place consists merely of a small industrial centre and a grand villa, the owner of which could have nothing in common with Tolbiac and his fellows. Besides, the animation caused by the incessant passage of trains on the two lines which form a junction here, the one running to Orleans and the other to Corbeil, was calculated to keep people interested in isolating themselves at a distance. At least, M. Lecoq thought so, and he was also led to believe that the enemy's headquarters were not so near to Paris. In difficult cases such as these he always obeyed his instinct, which rarely led him astray. So he thought that it was useless to tarry at Juvisy, and the third day, early in the morning, he reached Savigny-sur-Orge, where Piédouche, an hour later, made his entry on foot, with his pack on his back.

Savigny seemed worthy of a longer stay. It is a market town, containing about a thousand inhabitants, and its environs are dotted with villas and country houses. It is situated at rather more than twenty kilomètres from Paris, and without including the railway, it is reached by two fine roads, one of which starts from the Barrière d'Enfer and passes by Sceaux and Longjumeau, while the other proceeding from the Barrière d'Italie, proceeds by way of Villejuif and Juvisy. That is to say, Savigny is very favourably situated, being neither too near nor too far from Paris, and of easy access by good roads, which are but little frequented since posting has been abandoned. The inhabitants were accustomed to see strangers, people from the capital who come to establish themselves, or to reside there temporarily.

Ex-queen Isabella of Spain has a grand domain there; several members of the old nobility, retired merchants, people of limited means, live there side by side on divided portions of the ancient feudal domains. The country, somewhat uninviting as far as Juvisy, becomes very pleasant as soon as one enters the valley watered by the Orge. It is undulating and wooded, two qualities which are greatly appreciated by Parisians who like the country. This picturesque little corner of France is indeed like an oasis placed between the denuded plateaus which fringe the Seine, and the bountiful but dreary plains of the Beauce. The view, moreover, extends over a magnificent forest beyond the confluence of the Orge and the Yvette. In a word, it is a spot where one can enjoy one's self and hide one's self at the same time. M. Lecoq appreciated all these advantages at one glance. He thought that the environs of Savigny ought to suit M. Tolbiac exactly, and that if he had pitched his tent anywhere it must be in this region so admirably adapted for ambuscades and a solitary life. Something told him that this suspicious personage's centre of operations ought to be found among these ravines, woods, and water-courses. The town interested him less, although it is built on a charming hill. It was little likely that Tolbiac would select a residence there, for it is impossible to live mysteriously in a village, or even in a small town.

However, to conduct a search with any chance of success, the first thing is to obtain information by talking with people who are well informed. So M. Lecoq had, in the first place, taken up his quarters at the Grand-Cerf, the best hotel of the locality, and he could not have hit upon a better place.

M. Bonasson, the landlord of this establishment, had lived at Savigny a great many years, and knew everybody for three leagues round. He knew the origin and exact figure of their fortunes, the alliances and quarrels of the different families, the scandalous stories respecting them, and a hundred other things as well. Inquisitive by temperament, and well informed by his position, he was in addition a talker, and might even be called a tattler.

The nabob, now become M. Aristide Chalumet, did not neglect to draw upon so valuable a source of information, and to ingratiate himself with the landlord, he commenced by asking for the best room in the house and a good breakfast. Neither did he neglect to announce his position as the representative of the wealthy firm of Rawson & Jenkins, and to announce that he intended to visit all the rich residents of the locality to offer them his excellent products. The arrival of a commercial traveller at Savigny is at any time almost a notable event, for these business ambassadors seldom stop except at towns of a certain importance ; and, besides, many of the inhabitants of the place buy their provisions direct from Paris. But the envoy of Messrs. Rawson & Jenkins, who only sold wines which, at least, cost five francs a bottle, ought to create a sensation, and did so.

The landlord of the Grand Cerf himself cooked his customer's breakfast, and when it was served, to show him greater honour, he asked him if it would be agreeable to him to have a big-wig of the neighbourhood as companion. M. Lecoq was not inclined to refuse, and, in fact, he was glad to accept the offer, for in this manner chance might bring him the information he sought for.

XXXIII.

YES, indeed ; the company of one of the notables of Savigny was just what would suit M. Lecoq, who only desired to inform himself, and yet he did not wish to show too much eagerness, in order to sustain his rôle as the representative of a wealthy firm. "I am in the habit of eating alone," he said to the landlord.

"Then, monsieur is not like our French travellers," said M. Bonasson. "They all make a grimace when I tell them that we have no *table d'hôte*."

"They are right, dash it ! a *table d'hôte* is delightful. Jokes are passed around ; and, during dessert, bets are made—and champagne comes on."

"Quite so ; so it suits you too ? But I thought you said you always eat alone?"

"It suits me like a glove, and I can tell you that I held my place there in my time, when I travelled for a firm at Cette. But now, sedateness is the order of the day ! My patrons don't like me to carry on with comrades ; they declare that it spoils business."

"What foolishness, my dear sir ; but the English are just like that."

"Yes, indeed ; if they were listened to, no man would enter a café, and between you and I, I don't deprive myself of that."

"That would be a pity, for I have one in the next room : it is my wife who takes charge of it, and only the choicest liqueurs are served there."

"We will see about that after breakfast, Papa Bonasson, especially as there can't be much amusement in the streets of Savigny-sur-Orge, and I shall soon have made my tour of the inhabitants."

"Oh, yes, that's true. There is not much for you to do here, but in the

country round about it's different—all millionaires. I know more than fifteen of them who won't find your Madeira too dear. For instance, there's a traveller from Toulouse here, a man who only takes orders for *pâtés de foie de canard* and *terrines de Nérac*. A queer fish, as you may believe. You will meet him in the café, and, if you like, he will play you a game of billiards with his nose. Well ! he arrived here the day before yesterday, and he has already done a good business. He has been to all the villages and farms between Epinay, Villemoisson and Morsang."

"A man who cannons with his nose ! The deuce ! he must be a curious fellow, and I shall be delighted to meet him," said M. Lecoq, eagerly.

It was not that he would take the least pleasure in witnessing the strange proceedings announced to him, but he foresaw that this travelling jester, who had just been through all the surrounding district, could tell him a great many things.

He also hoped to extract considerable information from the citizen whom the landlord was going to introduce to him, and he thought it as well to inform himself in advance respecting this personage. "So, Papa Bonasson," he continued, "your monsieur doesn't belong to the neighbourhood, then, since he feeds at the hotel ?"

A consummate actor, M. Lecoq had from the first adopted the tone and language of a traveller. He knew that these gentlemen always called the hotelkeepers by their names, and so he spoke to the landlord of the Grand Cerf as Papa Bonasson in the most natural way.

Coming from a man holding a high position in the hierarchy of the representatives of commerce, this familiarity had its value, and the landlord felt greatly flattered thereby. "He does not belong to Savigny, but he has lived here for the last five years," he said, smiling slyly. "And, without flattering myself, I must say that he has been fortunate to find a house like mine."

"Then he isn't married ?"

"He ! there's no danger of that. In the first place, he has passed the age ; and then he hates women, children, and the bother of a family. I have an idea that he had some trouble with the sex in his youth."

"That's evident, papa. What does he do, your bachelor ?"

"Nothing at all. He was partner in a large commercial firm in Paris, and made a deal of money. One fine day, however, he sold out his interest, bought a house in the middle of the village, came and established himself there with an old housekeeper he brought with him, and has lived there ever since."

"But why did he choose Savigny rather than Courbevoie or Joinville-le-Pont ?"

"Well ! I don't know, and I wouldn't mind betting but what he doesn't know himself. He's an original such as you never saw. Imagine to yourself that he does nothing but prowl about the whole day long to pick up all the tittle-tattle of the place, and to tell it from door to door. The rest of the time he lives all alone like a wolf, eats in his kitchen, and never invites any one."

"Then he must feel awfully dreary. I wouldn't lead such a life if I were my own master. I might as soon do like my employers, who never drink anything but tea, and pass their Sundays singing psalms."

"Father Fouineux doesn't even drink tea, he drinks water at home ; but, by the way, he accepts claret, burgundy, and champagne whenever it's offered to him."

"It's perhaps to have it offered to him that he comes here to breakfast?"

"No, it is to tell bad things about the people of Savigny, and to relate the bad tricks that women have played his friends—not himself, for he always avoids them as he would the cholera."

"He's a nice fellow, your Monsieur Fouineux, and I am curious to make his acquaintance," said Aristide Chalumet, sardonically. "But what makes you think he will come? You told me just now that he ate at home."

"In the evening, yes. His servant cooks him some soup or porridge, he swallows it, and goes to sleep on it. But every morning, at ten o'clock precisely, he arrives to see if I have a commercial traveller, and when I have one I put on two covers."

"A strange mania, all the same. And if the traveller doesn't want him?"

"Well! I couldn't force him. But that seldom happens. They always accept, if only to poke fun at him. Tambournac, the traveller for the pâtés, made an ass of him on the day before yesterday."

"He won't be one of our party, Tambournac?" asked M. Lecoq, who counted so much on this fellow's prattle.

"Not this morning. He has gone in the direction of Villemoisson, and has probably taken a snack on the way. But he will come to the café as twelve o'clock strikes, for certain. That makes me think that ten o'clock has struck, and Father Fouineux hasn't shown his nose at the end of the street yet. However, he won't be long, for he is regulated like a clock—and close with that. Would you believe it, he pays me thirty sous for his breakfast, and eats enough for four? If that is not shameful!—a man who has an income of at least forty thousand francs, and from the State funds, too; as proof of it, he goes to Paris twice a-year to receive it. He made his little journey again last January, and brought back his bank-notes, but no one knows what he does with them."

This interesting conversation was held on the threshold of the hotel, and M. Lecoq willingly prolonged it, for he knew by experience that a man always learns something by chatting with a hotel-keeper.

His host had not as yet divulged any secret to him, but the two individuals whom he had been talking about might be good ones to consult with, and he felt impatient to meet them. He did not have to wait long. "What did I tell you?" exclaimed the landlord. "There's Monsieur Fouineux just turning the corner of the Place de l'Eglise."

"Then I will take my seat at the table," said the false commercial traveller. "That will save you the trouble of introducing me, as they say in England. Tell him that I like to laugh, and that I don't mind paying for a bottle of good wine. That will put him in a good humour, and will loosen his tongue."

And thereupon he hastened into the dining-room, where the places were laid on a round table, covered with a snow-white tablecloth. The Grand Cerf, which was then chiefly patronized by landowners and sportsmen, was not like those much-frequented caravansaries, with their oilcloth-covered tables, on which the flies alight in swarms. M. Lecoq placed himself in such a way that his table companion, who would sit opposite him, would be in the full light, and prepared himself to extract from him all the information he could furnish.

The door opened, and he saw a figure which would have rejoiced a *genre* painter, or a novelist of the Balzac school. The landlord pushed the new-

comer into the room, and said in an earnest manner : "Hurry up, Monsieur Fouineux. The breakfast will be cold. And monsieur has been waiting ten minutes for you."

One of M. Fouineux's manias—a mania willingly humoured by the landlord—was to let the casual customers of the hotel believe that he habitually took his meals there. He also liked to be treated familiarly by M. Bonasson, who continued, shrugging his shoulders : "Dash it all ! you must have been more punctual at your office when you were a partner in the firm of Lheureux, Bérard & Company ! "

XXXIV.

M. Lecoq had a memory for everything—facts, figures, and names. That is one of the most indispensable requisites of the profession. So he pricked up his ears as soon as he heard the landlord pronounce the name of the firm in which the retired merchant of Savigny had formerly been a partner. He knew on the tip of his fingers all the details of the criminal prosecution which had terminated in his son's conviction, and he had not forgotten that the man murdered in the Rue de l'Arbalète was M. Pierre Lheureux, of the firm of Lheureux, Bérard & Co., wholesale dealers in textile goods.

In this style and title the name of Fouineux did not appear. But the circumstance was worthy of attention, and M. Lecoq resolved to obtain more light on this, as yet, obscure point.

"When I was in business, I made it a duty to be punctual," replied the tardy customer. "Punctuality is the politeness of business men. Now that I am a citizen, I have the right to do as I please."

M. Fouineux had as yet but uttered two sentences, and already M. Lecoq had judged him. The axiom, borrowed from Louis XIV., and applied to merchants, and the declaration of the rights of a citizen in connection with a breakfast at a tavern, had thrown ample light on the new-comer's character and intelligence. In a physical sense, moreover, he was a thorough type of the Parisian shopkeeper, envious, vain, fastidious, grasping, and pretentious. All his defects rhymed with his name, and his physiognomy reflected them all. This little, thin, dry, shrivelled-up, and pimpled old man had a mouth almost without lips, a sharp nose, eyes of different colours, a narrow forehead, and an angular figure. When he smiled—and he often did so—one would have sworn that he was making a grimace after eating a green lemon. And this sourness of expression was tempered by an air of silly solemnity which would have rendered even the traditional M. Prudhomme* himself jealous. It was sufficient to look at him to understand that he had passed his life in tormenting his partners, saving money, and giving lessons to the government.

M. Lecoq at once resolved to play on this disagreeable old man as one plays on a guitar. It was only necessary to touch the strings to make him give forth his unpleasant but instructive sounds. "Monsieur," he gravely exclaimed, "you are right. Liberty is liberty. All men are equal. That is why you have the right to keep me waiting, and it is also why I have the right to commence to eat my chop without you. Bring it in, Papa Bonasson, that beloved chop, and don't forget the green seal. You have the green seal, of course ? "

* The type of the Frenchman of the middle classes portrayed by Henri Monnier.
—[TRANS.]

Judging that the ice was broken between his two customers, the landlord disappeared and soon returned with his arms laden with dishes and bottles.

"Monsieur travels for wines?" asked Fouineux, while unfolding his napkin and stuffing one end of it into the opening of his waistcoat.

"You are right, my lord," replied M. Lecoq in a familiar tone. "Do you know that you must be very shrewd to have guessed that the first time?"

"A man has not been thirty years connected with a large business without acquiring some knowledge of his fellow-men."

"And whether it be a question of spirits, cloths or colonial commodities, the individual who sells them, you recognise. I am not so skilful. In what line were you, monsieur?"

"In textile goods."

"A fine business, sir, a national business. Flax husbandry is essentially French, and I am a good Frenchman, although I don't often have an opportunity of seeing the Vendôme Column, as I pass three-fourths of the year travelling in the country and the other fourth in Liverpool."

"Monsieur represents an English firm?"

"Rawson, Jenkins & Co., Spanish and Portuguese wines. Branch establishments at Jerez and Oporto. Importations direct. Purchased in the producing country."

"And monsieur comes to Savigny-sur-Orge to dispose of his liquids?"

"To inundate the locality and the surrounding district, my dear sir. Sherry of all kinds, Oloroso, Amontillado, Port, Malaga, Tintilla de Rota, Alicante, in bottles, barrels, and casks. At your service, M. Fouineux."

"Thanks. That stuff doesn't agree with my constitution. I'm bilious."

"That's plain to be seen. You are severe when you say 'stuff,' but I don't get angry when my products are talked against, providing those who do so either buy them or help me to dispose of them. You don't wish to take any, but you will give me a helping hand. Papa Bonasson has told me that you know all the big-wigs about here."

"I know them—without being acquainted with them. When a man has been for thirty years in a large business in Paris—"

"He holds country people in contempt, that's understood. I wish I could do the same, but I have need of them. With you it is different. Your ball is wound up, from what I have heard."

"It is true that I possess a nice competence, honestly made, more honestly than the fortune of a man who has just bought an estate and a villa near by."

"That is the way to talk ; you are not like the merchants of to-day, who become millionaires by hiring a hunting-place by the year and frequenting *cocottes*."

"No, sir ; and I pride myself on it."

"I drink to your wisdom, M. Fouineux. Papa Bonasson's green seal doesn't come from Spain, but it can be drank," said M. Lecoq, pouring out an ample bumper for his companion. "That's no reason, however, why I shouldn't offer you a bottle of champagne. Let it be the best you have, landlord, and bring up two rather than one."

Touched by the honour which the vendor of Peninsular wines had done the cellar of the Grand Cerf, the landlord ran in search of the bottles asked for.

"With your permission, M. Fouineux," continued the false traveller, "we

will also drink a toast to the ladies. I'll bet that there are some charming ones in Savigny."

"If I wished to win your money I should take your bet."

"Bah! the district is then badly off in respect to the sex which adorns life."

"You consider that it adorns it?"

"My faith, yes. I'm no longer a man in early manhood, but I still sacrifice to the Graces, and I am sure that you have not taken your farewell of them."

"Monsieur," replied the retired merchant, majestically, "I have never married, because I know the inconveniences of married life. With still stronger reason, I have never committed the folly of entangling myself illegitimately. I had seen from too near the consequences that may result from *liaisons* condemned by morality."

"Really?" asked M. Lecoq, laughing. "Then you have had friends who were inclined to be over gay?"

"Friends! no. I would not have admitted that they frequented people of equivocal morals. I will even add that I should not have suffered it. But I had a partner who paid dearly for his follies."

"He was ruined?"

"Better than that. He was assassinated."

"Assassinated!" repeated M. Lecoq, feigning great astonishment, but really profoundly moved by the hope of learning something fresh respecting the tragical death of M. Lheureux. "How the devil did it happen?"

"It is easy to see that you have just come from England," replied Fouineux, with an air of importance. "All the French newspapers have talked of nothing else for four months past, and the assassin was condemned to death only three weeks ago."

"Good! I have it then. It's the affair of that woman in the Quartier Mouffetard—the affair of the queen of spades. I read about that, but I had forgotten there was a man killed too."

"That man, sir, was the unfortunate Lheureux, formerly my partner: Pierre Lheureux, Bérard & Company."

"Then you were no doubt summoned as a witness?"

"No, sir. When the event occurred, I had left the firm three years. It was Bérard, my former chief clerk, who bought my share. He will end as the other one did—for the fellow's a bad case, a rover who frequents actresses."

M. Feuineux's opinion as to the conduct of his successor was interrupted by the entrance of Papa Bonasson, who brought two bottles in silvered helmets. He hastened to remove the helmet from one of them, and, as though foreseeing this treat, he had already furnished the table with champagne-glasses, the foam soon sparkled and the glasses chinked.

Fouineux never had to be begged to drink when it was not he who paid for the liquor. "I did not then give my testimony," he continued, "and, nevertheless, I am the only man who received the confidences of poor Lheureux, and I was the last one to speak to him."

XXXV.

"WHAT! you saw M. Lheureux the day he was killed?" asked M. Lecoq, controlling his emotion.

"An hour before the murder," replied Fouineux, with the satisfied

gravity of a man who realises that he is being listened to with interest, and who wishes to hold forth at his ease.

"Really? Tell me what he said to you. It must be curious. I did not follow up the affair, but I read enough to wish to know everything respecting it."

"You fall well, for I am going to tell you what nobody else knows."

Fouineux leaned back in his chair on saying this, and it was evident that he was going to make all the effect possible. Louis's father could scarcely control himself. He hoped that this idiot was about to reveal to him some important details as yet unknown, and that the secrets he disclosed would furnish new proofs of the innocence of his son. The landlord had retired, and his presence no longer restrained the expansion of the vain and talkative ex-merchant. "My dear sir," he continued, "you are astonished that I should have kept what I know to myself. You are of opinion that I ought to have gone before the investigating magistrate, and have given my testimony before the Assize Court."

"I candidly admit to you, I should have probably come forward if I had been in your position," said the false traveller, who expected at an opportune moment to demand the testimony of M. Fouineux.

"Well, as to me, I have other principles on that point. I have principles about everything. I think that a citizen ought to tell the truth to the magistrates when he is questioned by them, but I also think that he is not obliged to speak when nothing is asked of him."

"Nevertheless—"

"Excuse me. I ought to pay my taxes, ought I not? Very well. If I don't pay them the collector ought to send me a notice. The judges did not summon me. It was not for me to run after them to enlighten them. They receive salaries; let them earn them by attending to their duties. I don't belong to the police, not I."

"That's right," muttered Father Lecoq, astounded by the folly of this reasoning, which did not touch the point; "you say, then, that you saw your former partner a short time before he was killed?"

"Why, yes. I went to Paris to receive my income at the Treasury—I go there every six months. It was the 13th of January, on a Saturday; I wished to return to Savigny the same evening, because I never sleep away from home. It is a principle. I had been obliged to go to Batignolles on business, and it was a little after seven when the omnibus set me down at the Odéon. The train started at eight o'clock. I had just time to go to the station on foot. I never take a cab. That is another principle of mine. I go on my way, and who do I meet at the corner of the Rue Soufflot? Lheureux, who lives two steps from there. He waylays me, leads me along, and commences to relate his last jokes to me. It was his style. It made no difference that I told him that I was not amused by them, he went on and on. There were moments when I should have liked to have stopped my ears. That evening he was in high spirits, and, behold, he relates to me the story of an Englishwoman whose acquaintance he had made in London, where he had gone last year to attend to a law suit."

"The woman who was murdered with him?"

"Precisely. He told me wonderful things about her. She was such a beauty as had never been seen, and she adored him—at fifty-two years of age—just think of it; and she lived, to please him, in the Rue de l'Arbalète. On that, I laughed in his face, as you may suppose. He got angry. I commenced to lecture him. I observed to him that he would do better to

remain with his wife and children than to go of an evening and carry on with a creature of that kind. For he went there every evening, the fool ! Do you know what he replied to me ? He answered that he had just had a nice little supper sent to his damsel's house, and that if I would go and eat it with him, we might have a good time of it. If you had heard how I refused him ! ”

“ If you had gone, the crime would not have been committed.”

“ You think so ? Well, I am sure that instead of two corpses, there would have been three,” said Fouineux, in a tragic tone. “ If I had gone there, I should not be drinking champagne with you this morning.”

“ Nevertheless, the assassin would not have dared to attack two men.”

“ The assassin was not alone, since they arrested his accomplice carrying the woman in a trunk. You know, that deaf-mute they let escape so stupidly. And then, the assassin had a grudge against Lheureux ; he had determined to kill him that very evening, and my presence would not have prevented it.”

“ How do you know that he premeditated—”

“ Lheureux told me enough to make me sure on that point. I can hear him yet, as he related his affair to me on the Place du Panthéon. He said to me : ‘ My dear fellow, I should be as happy as a cock if there wasn't a young swell who hangs around my Englishwoman to get her away from me. It seems that he formerly knew her in London, and that they met again here. I have already met him two or three times in the evening leaving the house just as I entered it, and I suspect that he wants to persuade Mary to leave me and return to England. She has even ordered her servant to pack her trunks, and has threatened to leave this evening. We quarrelled about this young swell, but she proved to me, as clear as daylight, that she didn't care for him ; so we made it up, and I shall take supper with her at nine o'clock, old fellow.’ What a fool that poor Lheureux was ! ” concluded the narrator.

“ He told you nothing more ? ” asked M. Lecoq, in a voice which trembled in spite of him.

“ Oh, I have passed over a good deal. He gesticulated, blustered, and repeated to me ten times over : ‘ If the fellow shows his face during supper, I will throw him out of doors. He's a strong young chap mind, tall, dark, twenty-eight years old, with a black beard and broad shoulders ; a robust fellow, in fact ; but I'm not afraid of him, and I'll settle his account for him in a hurry. That will teach him not to trespass on another man's ground. Such puppies don't trouble me much. I have as many years as I have thousands of francs income, but I have still some good muscles, my dear fellow.’ Yes,” added M. Fouineux, with an ironical grimace, “ he had a good deal to brag of about his muscles. But that scoundrel of a Lecoq broke his head with a blow from a stick, before he had time to raise his hand.”

On hearing this name uttered, to which M. Lheureux's ex-partner attached an insulting epithet, the father of the condemned man shuddered as though he had heard his son's sentence read a second time. The details which this horrible little old man had heard from his ex-partner left no doubt. It was certainly Louis's portrait which had been sketched by the murdered merchant when he described his rival, or at all events this portrait did not in the least resemble Tolbiac. M. Lecoq was dismayed, but he fought against the emotion which assailed him. He succeeded in overcoming it, and was about to question M. Fouineux on several points which he wished elucidated, when the door abruptly opened.

An individual as long as a rainy day, and as lank as he was long, entered the dining-room like a bomb enters a casemate. This individual, who strikingly resembled Don Quixote, was none other than the illustrious Tambournac of Toulouse, the traveller for *pâtes de soies de canard*, and troubadour into the bargain. He assumed an attitude in front of Fouineux like a tenor before an audience, and in a deep bass voice, so deep that it might be called sepulchral, commenced singing the air of *Joconde*:

“ J'ai longtemps parcouru le monde,
Et 'on m'a vu de toutes parts,
Courtisant la brune et la blonde,
Aimer, soupirer au hasard.”

Louis's father had no wish to laugh, and yet this grotesque apparition enlivened him a little. Besides, he knew that this ambassador of *terrines de Nérac* had just been travelling through the environs of Savigny, and he hoped that by chatting with him at random, he would furnish him with some useful information.

“ Monsieur,” said Father Fouineux, “ you might as well go outside to sing.”

“ You still bear me a grudge then,” exclaimed the Gascon. “ Why? Because I teased you yesterday? That's no reason. One day follows another, but they bear no resemblance to each other. This morning I am as artless and as sweet as a child just born, and you might, without much inconvenience, admit me to partake of your pleasures. In the first place, O Fouineux! I have thrown off my venom. I have none left. I have just passed two hours worrying the Englishman at the mill on the Yvette, and I have no further wish to shave any one.”

XXXVI.

THIS repartee awakened M. Lecoq's attention. Nobody could speak of an Englishman, an Englishwoman, or even of England, in his presence, without his thoughts at once recurring to the affair of the Rue de l'Arbalète. But he was too shrewd to take the ball on the bounce—that is to say, to ask at once for information regarding the person Tambournac referred to.

However, M. Fouineux undertook to furnish it to him. He was greatly vexed that the commercial traveller had curtailed the effect he was making, and so he hastened to contradict him. “ I should rather think that it was the Englishman who worried you,” he said, with a bitter smile.

“ You must learn, my little father, that Tambournac isn't worried like a sheep,” replied the Gascon in the most serious manner possible. “ Your Englishman is able, more able in himself alone than all the inhabitants of the district, you understand; yet, be it known to you, virtuous Fouineux, he has found his master. Just as you see me, with a little speech which was quite prepared, I took him down, my worthy sir, I took him down.”

“ Oh, come now, that'll do. I will bet that he didn't even see you.”

“ How much will you bet? If it is less than six bottles of champagne, I don't care to bet, as I need at least half a dozen to staunch the thirst which I have contracted this morning in the exercise of my profession. But I'll bet you that it was not you who paid for the two bottles on the table.”

Fouineux did not reply except with a suppressed growl, and M. Lecoq seized the opportunity to take part in the conversation.

"A drink isn't refused between colleagues," he said, filling a glass, which he offered to the Gascon.

"You remind me, citizen, that I have forgotten to introduce myself," exclaimed Tambournac. "I call you citizen because I presume, my dear colleague, that the title does not hurt your feelings. I, on my side, have the honour to be, and you behold in my person, the citizen Oscar Tambournac from Saint Gaudens, envoy ordinary and extraordinary of His Most Serene Highness Truffles!" And stopping M. Lecoq with a gesture at the moment when he also was about to state his name and position, he continued; "Not a word, citizen. I know what you are about to tell me. I have been informed by the respected Bonasson, landlord of these premises. You are Aristide Chalumet of the firm of Rawson, Jenkins & Co. Remark that I say *and Co.*, although I do not know a word of English. You travel for wines from that beautiful country which produces the Andalusians. I for the *foies de canard* from the city which gave birth to Clemence Isaure, who invented floral games. So we are brothers, and I drink to your amours."

Tambournac enforced his period by conscientiously emptying his glass, and Lecoq did as much, although the narrative he had heard from M. Fouineux had made him sick at heart. He felt the need of working himself up into harmony with this ridiculous jester, who would, perhaps, furnish him some useful information, and he experienced some of the sensations, so often described in novels, of a poor devil of a poet who is obliged to compose a drinking song to earn the means necessary to bury his wife.

"Come now, colleague," he said as gaily as he could, "you arrive at a good moment. Imagine to yourself that I have fallen from the moon into this country. My patrons send me here to dispose of some port and I don't know even a cat. You will guide my steps."

"Why, of course, my dear fellow, with enthusiasm. I know the district; I do. Every time that I arrive here, I regale the natives of Savigny-sur-Orge with the grand air of *Kettly, ou le Retour en Suisse*—

" 'Heureux habitants
Des beaux vallons de l'Helvétie,
Pays enchanté,
Sejour de la félicité.'

But I declare to you that you won't sell a bottle of your port. All downright rats, the happy dwellers in this charming valley. To your health, Papa Fouineux."

"What! not even the Englishman at the mill on the Yvette," exclaimed M. Lecoq.

"Ah! in fact—I thought no more about the fool," said Tambournac. "He drinks everything, and you can easily get him to take a hogshead of your port, providing it has plenty of brandy in it. Not that he needs it, for his cellar is full, but he never has enough, for he absorbs like a sponge. You will do as well to go and see him. Only, you must go early, because every day, by noon, he is dead drunk."

"The deuce! it cannot be very agreeable to talk business to him."

"Bah! a fellow goes at it just the same. The thing is to know how to take him. He's a proud original, but a good fellow, and not observing at all. Sovereigns flow through his fingers as the cognac does down his throat. Look here! I caught him by imitating Gil-Pérès of the Palais-Royal Theatre. He admires Gil-Pérès, whom he has seen play but twice in his life. It is very good on his part, for generally the English have no

taste for wholesome literature. Then, too, I flattered his mania by singing the roundelay of the ‘Brazilian.’ Do you know the roundelay of the ‘Brazilian,’ amiable Fouineux? No; you stopped at ‘*Ketty, ou le Retour en Suisse.*’ Don’t be afraid, I won’t sing it to you again.”

“I was saying to you then, colleague,” continued the Gascon, addressing M. Lecoq again, “I was saying to you that I was too much for him. He ordered a gross of my *pâtes* for the winter. So you can safely go with your wines, for he will have to moisten my *terrines.*”

“He lives in the country all the year?”

“Ask that of Papa Fouineux. As for myself, I only come here at the end of the season. But now for two years I find him faithful to his post, and always as drunk as thirty-six thousand men; that is a justice you can render him.”

“If he gets drunk it is because he has a reason for doing so,” said the ex-partner of the unfortunate Lheureux with a curious air.

M. Lecoq understood at once that this retailer of country gossip only asked for an opportunity to start off again into a narration, and he hastened to furnish him with a pretext for his malevolent prattle. “Can he have been disappointed in love?” he asked, smiling.

“He! Come now!” replied Fouineux; “he has never loved anything but drink. Remorse, rather.”

“Remorse! Then you think he has a crime on his conscience?”

“One or many, I do not know, but I say that that man’s life is not natural. In the first place, he never goes out, and never sees any one but his millers, who strike one as being no better than he is himself. Next, I defy any one to explain what he has come to this part of the country for.”

“How long has he been here?”

“Eighteen months, and he came nobody knows what for. The mill on the Yvette was for sale and no one wanted it, for the buildings were falling in ruins—without speaking of the horrible things which were committed there at the time of the *chauffeurs*, which had given it a bad reputation. One fine morning, however, an individual from Paris bought it, not dear, and paid for it in cash, without saying what he meant to do with it. Two weeks later the Englishman arrived by the railway with a kind of a servant who resembled a man of the woods. The master and servant went and installed themselves in a big building behind the mill, a huge hovel in which the rain falls through the roof.”

“Papa Fouineux, you exaggerate. It only rains on the second floor,” said the Gascon. “The first floor and the ground one are very comfortable. They are carpeted throughout.”

“Yes, it seems that he bought some furniture. With whose money? That is what the public prosecutor will ask him one of these days. And the millers he has put in the mill won’t be spotless either.”

“Millers! You astonish me. They’re always white,” exclaimed Tambournac facetiously.

“That’s all right. Those who live will see. It is not often that grain is ground by these folks.”

At this moment the hotel-keeper partly opened the door, and exclaimed:

“M’sieu Tambournac, the druggist and the veterinary surgeon are waiting for you in the café to have their revenge at a game of billiards.”

“I will be there in a moment,” said the Gascon traveller. “Excuse me, colleague, billiards are a sacred duty.” And he disappeared, leaving M. Lecoq *en tête-à-tête* with Fouineux.

XXXVII.

THE afternoon did not bring M. Lecoq as much information as the morning, and even the close of the breakfast did not fulfil the promises of its commencement. M. Fouineux, who, at first, had only asked to talk, became sullen and reserved as soon as Tambournac had left the room. As with all bilious people, his wine had made him melancholy, and instead of enlivening him, the champagne had the contrary effect. In addition to this, his vanity had suffered from the indecorous jocularity of the truffle traveller, and he felt unpleasantly towards him for having shown himself better informed respecting the Englishman of the mill on the Yvette.

The brazen-faced Gascon had succeeded in penetrating into the presence of a personage whom Fouineux had declared to be in the highest degree open to suspicion, although he only knew him by reputation. But it was enough to vex the little old man, who wished to hold the exclusive privilege of gathering and propagating the scandal and calumny of the neighbourhood. As long as the close-fisted citizen and the Gascon were together, M. Lecoq could hope to draw new information from them, by exciting them the one against the other ; but the antagonism of the two scandal-mongers had ended, and the one who remained had become thoughtful, and nothing would induce him to talk.

It was useless for Louis's father to turn the conversation on the unfortunate Lheureux, and throw out questions respecting the Englishman in hopes of obtaining explanatory answers. Fouineux remained buttoned up to the chin.

M. Lecoq was at last obliged to change the conversation from prudence. He thought that he perceived that the ex-merchant had commenced to mistrust him, and was not far from taking him for a spy or provoker of sedition. From that to denouncing him to the gendarmerie there was but a hair's breadth. So the rest of the time they spent together was devoted to talking about the people of Savigny in general. In regard to his fellow-townspeople, Fouineux gave himself full sway, and there was no sort of wickedness which he did not make known. According to him, the mayor had sold himself for office ; the rural guard was open to bribes ; the grocer mixed sweepings with his ground coffee and sold chocolate made of saw-dust ; the druggist's wife carried on an intrigue with the veterinary surgeon ; all the tradespeople were about to become bankrupts. The venomous old scamp did not even spare the tavern-keeper who gave him such good breakfasts for a franc and a half. He declared that Bonasson was a licensed poisoner, and the Grand Cerf Hotel a miserable cook-shop. As for the owners of the estates round about, that was worse still. There was not one of them, according to him, who had not been guilty of every imaginable infamy ; the pretty cottages and villas were all the abodes of Bluebeards or petty harems. He said so much, indeed, that M. Lecoq came to the conclusion that it would not do to attach much importance to what had been said by this ill-favoured old man respecting the Englishman who drank so much.

They separated : Fouineux to go and prowl about and play the spy, as was his laudable custom ; Lecoq, to stroll through the town on a business tour which was soon terminated. He did not care at all to receive orders, and had no expectations of procuring useful information. After visiting the houses of several private citizens, none of whom patronized him, and the

shops, where he learned that the Savigny tradespeople bought their Malaga and Madeira at Cette, where foreign wines are imitated more or less well regarding taste and style, but most deteriorously for the stomach, the ex-nabob thought of going to look up Tambournac, so as to try and inform himself further respecting the mill on the Yvette and its occupants. He went to look for him in the café, but the Gascon, after winning five or six games of billiards, and executing several fancy shots with his nose, amid the applause of the spectators, had started off on the road, in the hope of disposing of some terrines ; he had indeed gone in the direction of Longjumeau, where he meant to sleep, humming the air of the "Postilion" as he followed the highway. So M. Lecoq was left to himself till the time arrived for the appointment with Piédouche. He and his subordinate had met more than once since the morning in the streets of Savigny ; but, of course, they had showed no signs of knowing each other. However, M. Lecoq firmly expected that his subordinate would bring him some news in the evening on the Place de l'Eglise, for he had great faith in his energy and tact.

While waiting for the time for this meeting, Father Lecoq revolved in his mind the disheartening details which M. Fouineux had given him respecting the sad end of his former partner. The description of the detested rival which the deceased merchant had furnished was too exact to leave a possibility of mistake. The tall, dark young man whom the Englishwoman persisted in receiving in spite of the prohibition of her protector, the robust young fellow twenty-eight years old, was evidently Louis Lecoq. Tolbiac was neither of the age nor the *physique* for a lover, and, besides, nothing went to show that he had ever visited the house in the Rue de l'Arbalète, whereas all concurred in designating Louis. The portrait of Mary Fassitt found in his pocket ; his visit to the Morgue, a visit inexplicable to all who knew his character and habits ; the game of patience found at his residence in a secret place ; and, finally, a more conclusive proof than all others, Piédouche had positively recognised him as the man that left the cottage on the night following that of the crime. Was it necessary to conclude from this that he had killed the Englishwoman ? His father energetically refused to do so ; but he was nevertheless obliged to admit to himself that the unfortunate boy might have killed M. Lheureux in a moment of passion.

Louis was naturally violent, and his years had scarcely weakened the vehemence of his nature. He was not a man to submit to an insult, being so hot-headed and quick to strike. Given his temperament, the scene was easily explained. The merchant, who two hours before had spoken so freely of driving him away if he found him at the cottage—this irascible elderly gallant had no doubt grossly insulted him. A struggle had followed, in which Lheureux was killed, unintentionally perhaps, by his rival. All this was possible and even probable ; but how could this be connected with the abominable and coolly premeditated murder which followed ? Admitting that Louis Lecoq had struck the man who crossed him in his amours, why had he subsequently killed the woman of whom he had gained exclusive possession, since he had delivered her from her protector, or rather tyrant ?

And then, Father Lecoq knew very well that Louis could not be fascinated with this woman, for he passionately loved Mademoiselle Lecomte, and in a young and sincere heart there is not room for two passions. Why, then, did Thérèse's lover visit this foreigner who lived an equivocal life, when he was anticipating a legitimate union with a charming young girl ?

The old detective was obliged to relinquish his endeavours to solve this problem, and he also had to resign himself to never invoking the testimony of M. Fouineux, for that testimony would be overwhelming against his son. During the three days in which he had been engaged in active campaign against what might be an imaginary foe, the only discovery he had made was absolutely unfavourable to the condemned man, and this result of his first endeavours distressed him greatly. He compelled himself to forget it, at least for a time, and turned all his faculties as an investigator to the chances, still very uncertain ones, which had been opened to him by the gossip of Fouineux and Tambournac. The drunken Englishman, the mill of the Yvette, were to be visited ; but before risking an expedition of that kind, M. Lecoq wished to talk with Piédouche. He was not to meet him till ten o'clock at night, and the day seemed long to him.

He dined alone, for Fouineux only left his den for breakfast ; and so, after his repast, served to him by Maitre Bonasson in person, the detective went meditating along the banks of the Orge, which flows at the foot of the hill. Night overtook him before he returned to Savigny, and the rain had set in just in time to clear the streets of promenaders, so that he met no one on the Place de l'Eglise, which he reached at the appointed time. Piédouche had preceded him. He found him seated on a bench smoking his pipe.

"Governor," said ex-number 29, as M. Lecoq approached, "it isn't here as it was at Athis and Ablon. I've learned a heap of things, and I think we burn."

XXXVIII.

"In the first place," said Father Lecoq, "are you sure that no one followed you, and that no one is watching us ?"

"There's no danger, sir," replied Piédouche. "At this hour the people of Savigny are in bed. The church has been filled all the evening, but the service is over, and we can now chat as much as we like. No one will come to disturb us."

"I asked you that, because, this morning, I made the acquaintance of an individual living in the neighbourhood. He is wicked and mischievous, I believe him quite capable of playing the spy on us."

"His name is Fouineux, is it not ?"

"How do you know his name ?"

"Oh, I know a good many other things. And then, everybody in Savigny knows him, and everybody in Savigny hates him. They have talked to me of nothing else wherever I've been."

"Where are you lodging ?"

"At the Grand Vainqueur, the first tavern as you enter the place on the road to Longjumeau. You, sir, you put up at the Grand Cerf, kept by Bonasson. You breakfasted this morning with this fellow Fouineux and a commercial traveller from Toulouse, whose name is Tambournac. You see that I am well posted."

"Good ! but are you on a trail ?"

"On two."

"What are they ?"

"In the first place I have been told of a villa close by here between Villemoisson and Morsang, on the outskirts of a forest, a villa which has been rented this year by some Parisians, a gentleman and lady. They don't live

in it, but only come there from time to time to pass a day or a week. They see no one, and nobody knows them. That would look rather like what we are searching for."

"Any way, it must be looked into. What else have you learned?"

"That there is an Englishman in the environs."

"An Englishman who lives in a house close to a mill?"

"Ah! they have spoken to you about him?"

"A great deal."

"And what did they say to you about him? I ask you that to see if our information agrees."

"I was told that he was drunk most of the time, but that is nothing of much importance."

"No matter. As soon as an Englishman is in question I open my eyes and ears. The woman of the Rue de l'Arbalète was English; and then, that man is not like others. He leads an unsociable life, and no one has ever been able to find out why he came and established himself in an unfrequented part of the country."

"It is pretended that he runs the mill."

"Oh, come now, the mill hardly ever runs, and the miller and his wife are often away without anyone knowing where they go."

"Their neighbours must know it."

"They have no neighbours. The locality is a real desert. Murders were committed there in former times, and the rumour goes that ghosts are seen there at night-time, so that the country people wouldn't pass that way after dark for anything. And in the day-time they seldom go there. The mill and the shanty were rented for next to nothing for that reason."

"It's certainly somewhat singular that a stranger should establish himself there, but that does not prove that that stranger is in any way connected with Tolbiac. England swarms with queer people, eccentric as they say, and they travel freely. That one is perhaps a sportsman or an angler."

"Neither the one nor the other. There are nothing but gudgeons in the two rivers which meet before his house, and the right to shoot in the forest is held by some gentlemen in Paris."

"To have gathered so many details, you must have talked a great deal; talked too much, perhaps."

"I, sir! I've only listened. From the priest's servant—I sold her some needles and thread—to the druggist's wife, who bought some handkerchiefs of me, every woman in Savigny has had some story to tell about Atkins."

"And they invent some of them, no doubt. His name is Atkins, then, this Englishman?"

"Yes, George Atkins. He is not yet forty years old, and the veterinary surgeon's wife says that he must have been a handsome young man, and that he is still good looking."

"Atkins," murmured M. Lecoq. "That name doesn't appear on the list Cambremer left me."

"Speaking of Cambremer," continued Piédoch, "you may believe, sir, that I inquired properly without seeming to do so. No one has seen the little girl in these parts. No body has been found. If the villains who carried her off brought her this way, they know how to take care of her and haven't killed her. At least, unless they have buried her body in

some hole, or thrown it into the water with a stone at its neck. The fact is water is not what is lacking here. There is enough to turn a hundred mills like that of the Englishman. That doesn't prevent them from being idle three days out of four, and it isn't for want of grain. The district is close to La Beauce."

"But it is occupied by real millers, I suppose?"

"There are three of them : the man, the wife, and a young fellow who does the hard work. But this is what looks funny. It seems that the man and woman change from time to time."

"What do you mean they change?"

"Yes, sometimes one couple is seen, sometimes another ; one couple goes away, the other takes its place, and then a few days afterwards the first couple come back again."

"Now, that's something that looks suspicious."

"Very suspicious, sir, and I've taken it into my head to introduce myself into their household not later than to-morrow."

"As for myself, I have resolved to go and see the Englishman to-morrow."

"To sell him some wine ? That would be just the thing, for he drinks like a fish."

"And when he is drunk he must talk. I know how to make the English talk."

"Then it will go easy. And if you like, governor, while you are pumping him, I will be at work at the mill."

"Very well. To-morrow evening we will meet here at the same hour. There will still be the villa which you have spoken of."

"The Château de Sequigny, they call it. It is in the same direction, three kilomètres from here, and fifteen hundred yards from the mill. You could kill two birds with one stone and make one day's work of it by passing that way, but I think it would be better for us not to be in too much of a hurry."

"You are right. When one tries to work too fast, one does nothing well. Let us commence round about the mill. After that we will see. Nevertheless, I can't delay here ; time passes and the petition will come before the Cour de Cassation next week—this week perhaps."

"Pigache told me, the evening before we left, that it would not be so soon."

"Pigache knows nothing about it, and we must bring this matter to an end. If our trip brings no result, I am determined to denounce Tolbiac—I will set a trap for him—he will fall into it, and—"

"Without taking into account that during our absence the Auvergnats will find the servant," said Piédouche earnestly. And he added, so as to turn M. Lecoq's mind from the sad thoughts which assailed him : "Let us talk little and talk to the point, sir. To-morrow I will start out early in the direction of the Yvette. You will do the same—"

He did not finish what he was about to say, for he had felt M. Lecoq press his arm, and understanding that this pressure was a warning he turned round.

The night was dark, but as they chatted in the shadow at the base of one of the buttresses of the church they could see what was passing in the space beyond, which was lighter. M. Lecoq had perceived a shadow gliding along past the houses. Piédouche saw it also and whispered in his employer's ear : "It is perhaps a townsman who is going home, but one must be careful, even then."

"Let us separate," replied Louis's father, in a low voice, "we will meet to-morrow evening."

He then turned to the right, while Piédouche went in the opposite direction.

The man who had startled them for an instant turned into a cross street and disappeared. Just as he was passing in front of the druggist's shop, which was still lighted up, M. Lecoq obtained a better view of him, and it seemed to him that the man in question closely resembled M. Fouineux.

XXXIX.

ON the following day, M. Lecoq rose early in the morning and informed the landlord of the Grand Cerf that he wished to breakfast at eight o'clock, so as to have more time for visiting the villas in the environs. He had his reasons for doing this. M. Fouineux would no doubt come at ten o'clock as was his custom, and he had not the least desire for his company. This mean old man could no longer tell him anything of importance, and, on the other hand, he might dog his steps for want of something else to do, or out of curiosity.

If it were he who had come prowling round the Place de l'Eglise while Father Lecoq, and his subordinate were holding their conference, it was to be presumed that he felt inclined to spy into the movements of the representative of the firm of Rawson, Jenkins & Co.

Now, M. Lecoq positively wished to operate without witnesses, and he foresaw what might be the consequences if a man of a prying and malevolent disposition intruded into his affairs. M. Fouineux was one of those people who easily turn a peaceable citizen into an escaped convict, and who in that case start at once for the gendarmerie. And what Louis's father feared more than anything else was to have to make explanations to the authorities; not that he was liable to arrest, but because his steps would infallibly be watched as long as he remained in that part of the country. So the better to throw M. Lheureux's ex-partner off the track, he declared to M. Bonasson, while eating his breakfast, that he expected that day to go towards Viry, Grigny and Ris, hamlets situated on the Corbeil road, where some well-to-do people reside.

It was precisely in the opposite direction to the mill on the Yvette, and so as to deceive any who might have an idea of following him, M. Lecoq proposed to leave Savigny by the road to Viry and reach the Englishman's residence by a long detour. He did this. After partaking of a substantial meal, for he was of opinion that the mind is not in full activity when the body is insufficiently refreshed, he left the hotel, loitering for a moment on the steps to assure himself that Fouineux was not prowling round about, and seeing that this ill-favoured person was not visible, he walked slowly into the country. He was thoroughly acquainted with the topography of the district, and, besides, he had an excellent map in his pocket.

The old detective had neglected nothing. Experience had taught him that it was better to do without asking one's way of a passer-by or a countryman, and so, on an expedition, he always walked map in hand, like a staff officer on a reconnaissance. He consequently experienced no trouble when, at two kilomètres from the town, he was obliged to change his route. He was on foot, always following his system. A pedestrian can go everywhere and leaves no tracks, whereas a person who travels in a carriage, or

even on horseback, is obliged to choose his route, and to stop at taverns or farms, to leave his horse or vehicle there temporarily. And from this there would arise the necessity of talking with people and even telling them where he was going.

So M. Lecoq went on foot, and, in spite of his age, he was in condition to make long journeys without his limbs refusing their service. On reaching the banks of the Orge, instead of crossing the bridge which leads to Viry, he took a footpath which ran along by the brink of the river. The Orge is a large stream rather than a river, and joins the Seine near by, after watering a pretty valley which extends as far as Arpajon and Dourdan. A little above Savigny it is joined by the Yvette, another stream, which comes from the valley of Chevreuse, passing in front of Palaiseau.

The confluent is near the railroad just before Epinay is reached and not far from the little village of Villemoisson.

Louis's father knew all this on the tips of his fingers, and he had only to go towards the source of the Orge to reach his objective point. The mill was marked on the minutely detailed map he had in his pocket, and was, consequently, easy to find, especially with the indications furnished by Piédouche. So without hurrying himself M. Lecoq followed the sinuous course of the little river, and while walking along he was careful to examine the aspect of the country he was traversing. It was a somewhat picturesque landscape consisting of wooded hills, a stream bordered with willows, some green meadows, and white houses embowered among trees. It could nevertheless be fully divined that Paris was near by, and that this was a very civilised district.

A dramatist would not have chosen this quiet pleasant valley for an effective scene, and the idea would never have occurred to any one that a great crime had been committed there.

Tradition said, however, that more than one corpse had been consigned to the peaceful waters of these two rivers, and that at the time of the Directory it was by no means pleasant to occupy an isolated farm in the neighbourhood. The headquarters of the *chauffeurs* was, at that time, in the forest of Orgères, a dozen leagues distant, but the bandits often pushed their way to Monthléry and even farther. It was their road so that they might place themselves in communication with the highwaymen who held the forest of Senart. The older inhabitants of the district pretended that the race of these bandits was not extinct, and that if well sought for, some of the descendants of those scoundrels, the last of the Orgères band, who were executed at Chartres under the Consulate, might yet be found in the environs of Savigny. However the times had certainly changed, and Parisians when in the country thought no more of the *chauffeurs*.

Nor did M. Lecoq think any more about them. He was preparing for his entry into the Englishman's abode and his modes of attack. His object was to find out if this foreigner, whose strange habits astonished Fouineux, had not some connection with Tolbiac. The information he had gathered was in itself somewhat insignificant; nevertheless this mill, worked in so strange a fashion by millers, who relieved each other but did not run the mill; this villa rented by a lady and gentleman, who appeared only at intervals and were known by none of the neighbours; all these singularities constituted indications, which Lecoq connected with Tolbiac's absences, and led him to the conclusion that the matter was worthy of close examination. He had, as it were, a presentiment that he had hit on the right spot.

Piédouche had charged himself with the mill, while his patron was to

inquire into the Englishman and the occupants of the villa, whom he intended to visit later on if at all. At the end of half an hour's walk under the green foliage which fringes the Orge, M. Lecoq perceived on the other side of the river, at a considerable distance off, a house standing at the edge of a wood—a house flanked by two pointed towers, which gave it a certain feudal air. He took his bearings, consulted his map, and said to himself : "That must be it. A house which might strictly be called a château, on the edge of a forest. That's the villa spoken of. This village to my right is Villemoisson ; this other to my left is Morsang. The description given by Piérouche is exact."

Just as he was putting his map in his pocket, he espied, at a turning of the footpath, a priest who was coming towards him, but who had not perceived him, as he was reading his breviary very attentively. The meeting was not to be regretted, and M. Lecoq was preparing himself to bow politely to this priest, who was an old man with white hair, when he saw him leave the footpath and approach the brink of the river without ceasing to read. To a searcher there is no incident petty enough to be undeserving of attention. The venerable ecclesiastic was, according to all appearances, about to seat himself at the water's edge to continue his prayers. Nevertheless, something told the detective differently, and he at once stopped and even took the precaution to hide himself as well as he could behind a large elm tree. From this position he could see the old man advance to the brink of the river, shut his book, and shade his eyes with his hand. At the same moment, on the opposite bank, a man rose up, a tall young fellow, who had no doubt been lying down in the high grass, and who commenced to make gestures which the priest replied to by beckoning to him.

The man at once disappeared : at least M. Lecoq could no longer see him. The Orge at this point is considerably enclosed, and M. Lecoq, who was stationed at a distance of thirty yards from the right bank, readily explained to himself why the man who had shown himself for a moment on the opposite shore had disappeared. He had evidently descended to the water's edge, and the height of the banks had hid him from the view of the observer, who was still leaning against one of the elm trees which bordered the path. The priest also descended and was no longer visible.

"There must be a ferry there," said Louis's father to himself, "and that boy is the ferryman. He is coming after the priest with his boat. It's strange after all, for there is a bridge three hundred steps distant."

This last reflection determined M. Lecoq to remain to see the end of this otherwise insignificant incident. No one was to be perceived either on the path or in the fields, and there was nothing in proximity to the stream but a small wooden building which might be a shepherd's cabin or a hunting lodge. Very soon the priest reappeared on the right bank. He had just ascended it holding on to the ferryman's arm, and walked slowly towards the cabin escorted by this man, who was young, as near as M. Lecoq could judge from that distance. The young man and the priest chatted with animation, but Lecoq was too far away to hear what they said. They no doubt talked in a low voice, for he could not even hear the sound of their voices, but he could see their gestures, which were rapid and frequent.

"It seems as though the interview is an interesting one," he muttered, following them with his eyes. "One might think a professor and his student."

He did not watch them long. They reached the hut, the lad opened the door, let the priest pass in first, then followed him and closed the door.

This hut no doubt had a window looking out on to the meadow, but it had none on the side towards the river, so it was impossible for any one stationed on the left bank to see what took place behind the woodwork which hid the priest and his acolyte. M. Lecoq gave it up and went on his way.

"Everything is strange in this part of the country," he said to himself as he walked slowly along. "What business can this ferryman have to transact with this priest in an isolated hut? It is no business of mine, but I should rather like to find out."

He turned round two or three times, for it always worried him a little to leave a mystery unsolved behind him. But the hut remained closed, and as he was not accustomed to lose his time in useless reflections, he passed on. The footpath he followed soon brought him to a new landscape. The hill on which Savigny stands becomes suddenly steep at a turning in the country road, and directly opposite there is another hill equally abrupt. The Yvette, which separates these two elevations, runs at the bottom of a real ravine, the aspect of which astonishes strollers accustomed to the pleasant and gentle nature of the surrounding landscapes. The Orge here joins the stream which comes from the valley of Chevreuse, preserving its peaceful mien. One might say an amiable, timid young girl espousing a rough and sullen companion.

On the peninsula formed by the confluent and on the bank of the Yvette there stood the mill, a dilapidated building, with damp, moss-covered tiles. A little farther off stretched an unsightly building also roofed with tiles and lighted with three windows, the panes of which were broken. A young ruin, that is to say; the most unsightly thing in the world. This building had formerly had some pretensions to style. There was still a vane at each end of the roof, only the rain had rusted them so that they no longer turned, even when the wind blew the hardest. In the centre a lightning-conductor rose up, and it naturally occurred to passers-by that the first occupants of this dwelling must have had excellent reasons for fearing the fire from above. The door of the house was reached by a flight of steps which had once been quite ornamental, but weeds now freely grew between the stones which formed them. A semblance of a garden extended in front of the house. Sweet-briars had taken the place of roses there, and one could not have gathered a nosegay without pricking one's fingers with thorns. The nettles had choked the flowers. In a word, all gave evidence of abandonment in this desolate spot, and M. Lecoq was much impressed by the almost sinister view which presented itself before him so abruptly.

He already began to think that M. Fouineux was not altogether wrong in propagating malevolent rumours respecting folks who had come from afar to settle in this cut-throat place. And he said to himself that, in all the environs of the great city, there was perhaps not a single corner better adapted for a mysterious life. Counterfeitors could not have imagined a better place. A worm-eaten foot-bridge spanned the Yvette a short distance below the mill, and a hundred paces thence an old tumble-down arch covered the Orge. Communications were thus secured in both directions.

Before penetrating into this entrenched camp, M. Lecoq wished to make a closer examination of the advanced works. Having arrived opposite the mill, he saw that the three wheels in front of it were motionless. The water which set them in motion was not running, the sluice-gates, which were worked on the right bank of the stream, having been closed. Besides,

these wheels were no longer in a condition to work ; they lacked float-boards, and the spindles looked as though they were ready to break. The pleasant tic-tac, the miller's music, no longer awakened the echoes of the river bank. And, yet, the mill was inhabited, for at the open windows some linen was hanging, having evidently been placed there to dry in the sun. M. Lecoq listened for any noise which might announce to him that this building was not abandoned. He heard nothing at first, but his ear finally detected a dull and repeated sound, which seemed to him to come from the bed of the river. You might have said that the building was being demolished with a pick-axe.

Somewhat puzzled by this strange noise he retraced his steps and crossed the wooden bridge to reach the other side. When he had arrived there, he could see what was being done at the bottom of the race provided by the builders of the mill. This race was quite empty. A wall, which was still quite of a substantial character, stopped the waters of the Yvette laterally, and the dam with its closed sluice-gates held them back from above.

Now a man was engaged in turning up the damp soil of this artificial channel with a pick. This man had his back turned towards M. Lecoq, and, consequently, had not seen him. He was so much interested in his work that he did not turn round, so Louis's father could observe him at his leisure, and he saw that he was digging an oblong trench. The work was well advanced, and the man worked at it with all his might. What was his object ? This M. Lecoq sought in vain to divine. However, as he had not come to watch the operations of the millers at the confluent of the Yvette, he quickly determined to leave the spot. But, as he changed his position to proceed on his way, the weight of his body made the boards crack loudly beneath his feet. The workman straightened himself up quickly, turned his head, and saw a stranger watching him. He at once threw his pick on his shoulder, ran to a ladder which was leaning against the dam, and clambered to the top. In the twinkling of an eye he had disappeared, and almost as quickly the sluice-gates, raised by invisible means, let the water run in and rapidly fill the channel.

"What a strange manœuvre," said M. Lecoq to himself. "That fellow opens the sluices, but not to run the mill, for he hasn't let down the wheels. And then, why did he run away when he saw me ?"

XL.

MILLS are not usually worked in that way. Millers are generally very careful of water, and only open the sluice-gates in case of necessity. But the millers of the Yvette were somewhat peculiar, and paid but little attention to these details.

M. Lecoq was not greatly astonished by their proceedings, for Fouineux and Piédoch had forewarned him. Only he stored away in his memory the circumstance which he had just witnessed, as he had previously done with the meeting of the priest and the ferryman, promising himself to throw light on these little mysteries later on. For the moment he thought only of the enigmatical Englishman, and prepared to approach him. Besides, Piédoch had engaged to enter the mill and study its occupants.

So Louis's father set foot on the peninsula and walked towards the Englishman's residence. To reach it he had to pass in front of the mill, the door of which was wide open. One could enter the building at pleasure,

and this total absence of precaution seemed to prove that its occupants had nothing to bide. A hundred paces off stood the dilapidated house in which the Englishman hid his life, a life which must have been of the most eccentric kind, since he had found it necessary to leave his country, a country where the most extravagant characters are usually well esteemed. It was not yet noon, and to believe M. Fouineux, the Englishman was not completely drunk till noon, so M. Lecoq hoped to find him in a satisfactory state of lucidity, but he had no time to lose. He quickened his steps, and made his way as well as he could through the thickets of the unenclosed garden in front of the house. Once out of this virgin forest, he climbed the steps, strewn with all kinds of debris, and pushing open the worm-eaten door which stood ajar, found himself in a large apartment which had probably once been a hall. It contained no other furniture than a huge oak table, such as is used for the evening meal in farm-houses. A large fire burned on the hearth, although the weather was warm, and a man was stooping in front of it watching a large copper kettle which contained some smoking mixture.

M. Lecoq, not knowing whom he had to deal with, coughed gently to make his presence known. The man turned round and showed his face, which was bearded to the eyes and surmounted with a forest of red hair.

"Good!" thought M. Lecoq, "it is the servant. Fouineux was right, he resembles an orang-outang."

"What do you want?" asked this strange individual, with a strong English accent.

"I wish to see Monsieur Atkins."

"George?"

"Yes, Monsieur George Atkins."

"He's asleep,"

"I will wait till he wakes up, then."

"When he awakes he will take his grog, and as soon as he has taken his grog he will be drunk."

Any one but M. Lecoq would have been rebuffed, but he replied intrepidly: "So much the better."

"How so much the better?"

"Yes, that will be the right time to talk to him."

"What do you want with him?"

"I have come to sell him some wine."

"He doesn't drink it. He drinks nothing but brandy and gin."

"My wine is stronger than the strongest brandy. He would drink it if he once tasted it, and drink nothing else."

The man of the woods reflected for a moment and then said: "Do you sell it on credit, your wine?"

"Your master would have three years' time to pay for it."

"And when would you deliver the casks? He never buys except by the cask."

"By a week at the latest he can have ten, if he wants as many,"

"And one for me, eh?"

"Two for you into the bargain."

"Then go upstairs. George has just got up, his head's still clear. It's just the right time to nail him."

"You won't accompany me?"

"No. I am preparing the grog, and I can't leave the kettle."

"Tell me, at least, where I shall find Monsieur Atkins."

"In the room on the right hand at the top of the stairs. Go in without knocking, there is no lock on the door."

M. Lecoq took him at his word. He did not wish to wait till the master had swallowed the contents of the kettle steaming on the fire under the care of the bearded servant.

So he went up the stairs, which were at the end of the hall, interior partitions having long since been done away with in this strange villa. The ascent was not an easy one, for the warped steps no longer presented a horizontal surface. Some of them formed hillocks and some ravines ; some slanted to the right, and others to the left. One needed a sailor's foot not to stumble or slip. Another obstacle : Loosened by time and damp, the paper which had formerly covered the walls now hung in large strips across the stairs, and in order to pass one was obliged to push these screens aside.

However, M. Lecoq surmounted all these difficulties, and reached the first floor without accident. The door to the right was close at hand ; he had only to push it open. In front of him, and seated before a small table, in the middle of a room, the ceiling of which was pealing to pieces, he espied a man of frightful corpulency—about as large round as a cask, and tall in proportion. His sallow, bloated face resembled an enormous bale of fat. His hair, the colour of flax, fell in long locks over his eyes, which were dull and sottish, and looked as though they belonged to a boiled fish. His lower lip hung down on his triple chin, showing a double row of white, pointed teeth.

This hippopotamus, dressed in an old pair of linen trousers, and a red woollen shirt, balanced himself on a chair, and held a full glass of liquor, which he was about to carry to his mouth when Father Lecoq appeared on the threshold. As soon as he saw the old detective, he uttered some formidable sounds, which soon transformed themselves into English oaths. Such were the amenities with which he received his visitor.

Lecoq understood very well what was said, although he did not appear to do so, and he commenced, in French, the little speech he had prepared for the occasion. "Monsieur," he said, "would you like some real port wine, manufactured expressly for the English market ? Twenty shillings and sixpence the gallon. Payable in three years."

At this last statement the colossus set his glass down on the table and looked furiously at the man who had made him so advantageous a proposal.

"Who are you ?" he growled, rolling his wild eyes. "A rascal of a shopman like the other. You travel for a merchant who would like to swindle me. You are nothing but a fool. No one swindles me, it is I who dupe others."

"You like to jest, Monsieur Atkins," replied Father Lecoq, without the least discomposure. "Let us jest, then, it suits me to a T."

"I am not jesting ; I tell you that you offer me credit so as to entice me, and that you expect to sue me so as to make me pay."

"Sue you ! I should have to be crazy to do that. Does any one sue a gentleman as rich as you are ?"

"Where did you learn that I was rich ? It is your comrade who told you that ; the fellow who came yesterday to sell me some musty patties. Very well, tell him, from me, that I will never pay him for his merchandise!"

"You will do right not to pay him, for it is worthless. But my port is excellent, and when you have tasted it, I'm sure that you'll pay me for it. Real port from the firm of Rawson, Jenkins & Co. How many casks do you wish to have ? I shall write this evening to Liverpool."

"To Liverpool ! you are English then ? Get out, you dog. I detest the English, and I should like to see Liverpool burned to ashes. It was there my mother was hissed the most."

XLI.

Of this vehement apostrophe M. Lecoq retained but the last sentence. He cared nothing about being called a dog by a sot, and, instead of leaving the room as he had been somewhat impolitely invited to do by George Atkins, he unceremoniously sat down. He was determined to obtain from this strange personage an explanation of the singular statement he had just made. "You are pleased to tell me that your mother was hissed at Liverpool," he replied, with the greatest composure. "For that to be true, your mother must have been an actress. Jesting is all very well, Monsieur Atkins, but you will never make me believe that you are not a gentleman."

"Be quiet," cried the drunkard, striking the table with his fist. "I have said nothing about hissing—nor about my mother—and I forbid you to talk about it." And, catching hold his glass, he tossed off a full bumper of gin at one draught.

"Oh, I would rather talk business," exclaimed the spurious commercial traveller. "You say that you detest the English. That suits me, for I am French to the backbone."

"Then, why are you in the service of these Liverpool rascals ?"

"Because they pay me well, and because they sell wine of the first quality. I like to satisfy my customers, but that is no reason why I should not have first seen the light on the banks of the Seine."

"What is your name ?" asked George Atkins, abruptly.

"Aristide Chalumet. That is French enough, I hope. Never did son of Albion bear such a name as Aristide Chalumet."

"Then, you are not Tambournac ?"

"No ; Tambournac is the patty man."

"A scoundrel. He doesn't drink gin. Do you ?"

"Yes, but I like grog better."

"Don't talk foolishness. You don't even know what it is. I'll bet you this : that water and sugar are put into it."

"Oh, come now, grog with water, that is only good for girls. Pure rum, with a little lemon—that's the ticket !"

"Three pints of rum, three pints of gin, three pinches of pepper and a nutmeg. Let it boil."

"That's it. Your servant has just shown me that."

"Would you like to taste it ?"

"Very much ! I hear your man at this moment, he is just coming upstairs."

In fact the door opened and the red-headed servant entered, carrying an immense bowl filled to the brim with the infernal preparation described by his master.

"My boy," said the so-called Aristide Chalumet to the servant, "the thing is settled. Monsieur Atkins has ordered ten casks of my best port. I won't back out of what I told you ; you shall have two for yourself."

"It will be drank," replied the hairy servant, laconically.

"Chalumet, you are very generous," said Atkins with an air of distrust. "Who sent you here ? Was it that rascal of a Harry ?"

"Harry ! I don't know him," replied M. Lecoq. "Who is Harry ?"
"A rascal. But as I have just told you, all that doesn't concern you."
"Oh, not at all. I came to see you because I heard of you at Savigny."
"You have done right, you please me, although you are as thin as a red-herring. When shall I receive my ten casks ?"

"In ten days' time. And I will draw on you at three years' date. Only, you will accept the draft."

"No, Harry will accept it. Draw on Harry, my boy, draw on him. And if in drawing you can only kill him, you will rid the world of an ugly bird."

"But I don't know Harry," repeated the spurious commercial traveller coolly.

"That's so," grumbled the drunkard. "Very well, draw on me. In three years' time I shall be rich—and even before, for Harry pretends that by two weeks from now I shall be worth several millions."

M. Lecoq felt oppressed at the heart. Joy sometimes produces the same effect as grief. This search of his had been a chance one, but he had fallen on the right spot: he had knocked at a venture at a stranger's door, and this stranger's phrases showed a marked connection with Louis's affair. This was surely calculated to produce a strong effect on the father of the condemned man. George Atkins had just said that he was about to become a man of great wealth, thanks to an individual named Harry; and he had previously said that his mother had been hissed at Liverpool. These statements had a meaning for the old detective, who knew that Harry is English for Henri; that Tolbiac's Christian name was Henri; and that Ellen Fassitt, the youngest sister of Major O'Sullivan, had married a strolling actor in England. His grand-niece, Sophia Nesley, might very well have done the same. To tell the truth, the comparisons he had already established in his mind were still somewhat vague, and nothing proved that he had guessed right; but the interview was not yet at an end, and he fully hoped to be able to verify his conjectures before leaving Atkins.

The red-haired servant had set the smoking bowl upon the table, and had then gone to a dilapidated sideboard in search of a large glass, which he placed before M. Aristide Chalumet. Pleased by the princely manners of this commercial traveller, who gave away two casks as a gratuity, the savage wished to show him his gratitude, and having done so, he went off without opening his lips.

"Do you know how to drink ?" asked the drunkard, looking at Father Lecoq.

"As well as you do," replied the latter, composedly.

"We will see about that. Hold your glass. We must empty this bowl between us. If you stop, I shall refuse your port, and have you put out of doors."

"I shall stop when the bowl is empty."

"No; for I shall order another. But at the second one I will permit you to lie under the table, or on the table, whichever you please."

"I never lie down, except in my bed. Here's to your millions."

"My millions ! my millions !" repeated the Englishman, after tossing off a large draught of the fiery liquid. "I haven't got them ; my millions! —I shall never have them, perhaps."

"If you are heir to them, you'll inherit them."

"Heir ! who told you that an inheritance was in question ?"

"You," replied Father Lecoq, with rare bounce.

" You lie ! I expect no inheritance ; and if I expected one, I shouldn't talk about it. I'm forbidden to do so."

Lecoq bit his lips. He perceived that he must not go too fast. Atkins had already drank enormously, but he had not yet reached that condition when admissions escape the drunkard like water flows from the openings in a cracked vase. Still that fortunate moment could not be far distant, for he continually dipped an immense ladle into the bowl filled with grog, and never left his glass either empty or full, according to the famous precept found in various forms in the choruses of drinking songs. At the rate he was going there was but one danger—that he would become dead drunk before he had talked. So Father Lecoq had the triple task of forcing the Englishman on to convivial confidences, of stopping him at the precise point when he would no longer have sufficient self-command to restrain his disclosures, and when he would not have drank too much to lose his speech ; and, finally, of disposing clandestinely of the bumpers which his companion poured out to him. The last trick was not an easy one to execute, for Atkins was on the watch.

" Well, let us talk about something else," said M. Lecoq ; " for I must return early to Savigny to take the train for Paris. Do you often go to Paris, Monsieur Atkins ? "

" Never," exclaimed the drunkard ; " Harry won't let me."

" That's a pity. We might dine together at a fine restaurant I know of, and then we would go to the theatre."

" To the theatre !" said the mastodon. " You dare to talk to me about the theatre. You don't know then, that I belong—that I have been an actor—the best actor in England—and that I hold your French players in contempt."

" What, really ? you used to be an actor ? "

" Yes, worm of the earth, yes ; I was an actor. I have played on all the stages of the three kingdoms ; and if you had seen me in the part of Falstaff, you would know what a good actor was like."

" Oh, I can see very well that you were cut out to play Falstaff."

" Because I'm stout, eh, master Jack Frog ? Well, you may learn then that I have also taken the characters of Hamlet and Macbeth and Romeo. I was born on the stage, do you hear ? and my parents had the honour of appearing at the Haymarket with the great Kean. My mother played as Desdemona, and her name will be immortal. Her name was—"

At the very moment when the drunkard was about to pronounce the name which M. Lecoq awaited with such anxious impatience, the door of the room abruptly opened.

XLII.

At the noise made by the door, as it turned on its hinges, M. Lecoq looked round, and to his utter astonishment beheld a gendarme standing on the threshold. A gendarme in full uniform, his cocked hat on his head, his strap over his shoulder, and his sword by his side.

This apparition was not a pleasant one for the pretended commercial traveller. Still he put a good face on the matter, and waited for the representative of the public force to explain himself.

" Good-day, gentlemen all," said the courteous soldier. " I wish to say a couple of words to a person named Aristide Chalumet."

"That is I," replied M. Lecoq, rising.

"Good! then will you please come and chat a little outside."

M. Lecoq was especially the man of difficult situations. In the wink of an eye, his reflections were made. He surmised that artful M. Fouineux had been to notify the gendarmerie that a suspicious individual was wandering through the district, and that it was needful for the preservation of social order that his papers should be examined. The exhibition of a passport and of acceptable references, as they say in commercial parlance, was not what embarrassed the spurious Aristide Chalumet. He had everything in proper form, and could reply pertinently to all the agents of provincial authority. But he readily accounted to himself for the situation. Fouineux had plainly played the spy on him the evening before: he had surprised him in conference with a pedlar whom he had pretended not to know as long as the sun was shining, but whom he talked with confidentially as soon as the orb of day had disappeared behind the horizon. What father Lecoq feared was that he would be questioned as to his connection with this pedlar. He had set himself up as belonging to the commercial aristocracy, and so this connection was all the more inexplicable. As the matter stood, however, all that he could do was to act with a good grace.

"At your orders, sergeant," said he, advancing towards the soldier.

He preferred that the interview should take place outside, rather than in the presence of Atkins. But, unfortunately, the latter felt a desire to meddle in what did not concern him.

"Ah! ah!" he exclaimed, "it seems that you have some account to settle with the authorities of your native land, my friend Chalumet. You ought to have been naturalized an Englishman. In England there are no gendarmes."

"That's easily seen," said the soldier, drily. "In France, lunatics are prevented from leaving their country."

He did not seem to have much respect for the Englishman, who hearing this speech, made a grimace, and then not being able, or not daring to reply to it, at once turned to the representative of the firm of Rawson, Jenkins & Co.

"Come old lascar," he cried, "don't forget my ten casks. Three years' credit mind. You will be paid, for in three years I shall be rich. In the meanwhile, show me your heels, and go and lay down in your prison."

Lecoq champed the bit. He would have given all that was left of his fortune to know Atkin's mother's maiden name, but he felt that this was no longer the moment for questioning the sot. So he contented himself with replying: "Rest easy. I will write to Liverpool this evening, and instead of ten casks, you will receive a dozen."

And, thereupon, he followed the gendarme, but not without having politely saluted the Englishman, whom he was in reality half-minded to strangle. On crossing the lower hall, he met the red-headed servant, who had already placed a supplementary kettle on the fire, in case, as was very probable, his master should promptly absorb the grog he had just placed before him, and call for more. It was evidently this savage who had sent the gendarme to the first floor, and he did not deprive himself of the pleasure of sneering as he saw the traveller, who had promised him such a princely gratuity in wine, pass along under escort. The rogue loved port wine, but he still more enjoyed the misfortunes of others. The master and the servant seemed to have been created and brought into the world to live

together. At the end of the garden, Lecoq stopped and exclaimed : "Now, sergeant, you will do me the pleasure of telling me what you wish with me. I am on a business tour, and my time is worth money."

The gendarme allowed himself to be called a sergeant, although he was but a private soldier. Perhaps he was even sensible to this flattery but he only knew his duty, and so he replied, as he straightened himself up : "Begin by showing me your passport. You will attend to your business afterwards."

"My passport ? I haven't it with me."

This was true. M. Lecoq had equipped himself for this expedition in light marching order ; he had left his official papers in his trunk and was only furnished with the price-list of the firm of Rawson, Jenkins & Co.

"Then you refuse to obey ?"

"I refuse nothing at all. I have papers enough in my pocket-book to show that I am a commercial traveller, and I am quite ready to produce them."

"That is not the question. A man may very well be a malefactor although a commercial traveller. The question is to prove that you are authorized by the prefect of police to circulate freely through the country."

"I will prove it to you this evening at the Grand Cerf Hotel. I am stopping there, and M. Bonasson, who keeps it, will answer for me."

"I care nothing for the testimony of M. Bonasson, and I can't wait till evening."

"But, dash it ! since I tell you that I am all right, you can very well allow me to complete my tour. My luggage is at the hotel, and I have no desire to leave it there. The deuce ! I sha'n't run away on foot across the fields."

"I know nothing about that, and I summon you to follow me."

"Where to ?"

"To Savigny, and thence to the chief town of the district, if you are not in a position to prove your identity."

This categorical injunction irritated M. Lecoq to the highest degree. It surprised him at the most interesting moment of his voyage of discovery, and he saw himself already arrested, detained for twenty-four hours, and sent back to Paris from brigade to brigade. This unlooked for denouement of his enterprise meant his son's death, and in his exasperation he asked himself if it would not be better for him to take to flight. He had good legs, and the gendarme was too heavily booted to catch him. So he could get away, but what then ? After this escapade the district would be forever interdicted to him. In the midst of his perplexities, Providence came to his aid. He suddenly perceived a pedlar emerging from the woods, and at once recognised him. It was the faithful Piédouche who was arriving with his staff in his hand, and his pack on his back, and was walking quietly towards the door of the mill.

"Of course !" said Louis's father to himself, "I am very foolish to worry myself. This good fellow can readily replace me till to-morrow, and I even think that he will do better than I. Decidedly, I will go gently, it is the only way to get out of this." And, addressing himself to the gendarme, he said : "Come along ! Since it is absolutely necessary, I obey you, sergeant ; and, although it provokes me to sacrifice the rest of the day, I bear you no ill-will. You have orders ; you execute them—nothing can be said against that. Besides, Savigny isn't far off ; and in an hour from

now, you will recognise me as a peaceable citizen, and allow me to return to my occupations, I have no doubt of that."

"I ask no better," grumbled the man with the yellow belt.

On this reassuring conclusion, the captor and his prey took their way side by side towards the pretty village which that rascal old Fouineux had chosen for his residence. It was a mile and a half as the crow flies. A direct road, skirting the railway line, took them there in twenty minutes, and this short trip was enlivened by the jests of the gendarme, who was naturally facetious, and whom Aristide Chalumet's ready compliance had already appeased. This worthy fellow had even gone so far as to tell the suspected traveller that a denunciation had been addressed to the quartermaster, and he intimated that it came from an inhabitant of Savigny. Messrs. Rawson, Jenkins & Co's representative was accused of having come into the district with the object of revolutionizing it, and of carrying on political intrigues under the pretext of disposing of Spanish wines. M. Lecoq no longer doubted but what Fouineux had played him this mean trick ; especially as, on reaching the village, he met the old rascal sauntering in front of the hotel. He had come to rejoice over the success of his delightful invention, and, no less ungrateful than the red-headed servant, he sneered as he saw the man, who had treated him to champagne the day before, pass by conducted by a gendarme. But his joy was of short duration. Bonasson the landlord answered for his customer, who, moreover, produced his passport, which had been negligently left behind in his trunk. The gendarme declared himself satisfied, and almost apologized. M. Lecoq was free to return to his operations ; but it was written that the day was to terminate with a catastrophe. While his passport was submitted for examination, Louis's father had picked up a newspaper which was lying upon a table, and glanced at it in order to appear at ease ; and suddenly his eyes fell on the following lines :—

"In its sitting yesterday, the Court of Cassation rejected the appeal of Louis Lecoq who was condemned to death, on the 30th of April last, by the Assize Court of the Seine."

XLIII.

PIEDOUCHÉ, according to the programme which had been determined upon the night before with his patron, had left Savigny somewhat later in the morning by a road leading in a straight line to the confluent of the Yvette. He had satisfactorily employed his time before starting on his way. Rising at dawn, he had indulged in a complimentary tour of the village. When he had finished, there was not a house he had left unvisited, not a servant but who had related to him the secrets of her employers. He might have written a chronicle of all the scandal of the community. He was also more than ever convinced of the excellence of his procedure. You obtain more information from the humble than from the great, and no matter how much a man may conceal his life, his grocer, baker, and the servants know it. On farms, the ploughmen are not always discreet, and the girls who guard the turkeys sometimes chat with the passers-by. Piédoché made the most of these facilities, and he determined to apply his system in the country, as he had already applied it in the town. The pack he carried on his back would open every door to him, and give him the confidence of the villagers. In the country, townspeople are greatly mistrusted, but pedlars not at all,

for they know how to speak the language of the people, and save them the trouble of going to town for their supplies, without speaking of the charms their merchandise possess for the women, for no farmer's, miller's, or shepherd's wife can refuse to witness the delightful unpacking of handkerchiefs, calicoes, plated crosses, and glass rings ; and the pedlar must be very awkward not to succeed in making his customers chatter. Besides, Piédouche was a pedlar of a peculiar kind. He did not try to realise profits ; he was even disposed to sell at a loss, the better to gain confidence. So, how could he have helped winning the sympathy of all his rural purchasers ? Thus he started off, full of ardour and hope, resolved to commence with the mill, and to return there again and again, if the first visit taught him nothing. He had not to occupy himself either with the Englishman's abode nor the Château de Sequigny. Father Lecoq had taken charge of both those inspections.

On his way, Piédouche, having become the Dauphinois Paladru from head to foot, entered several cottages, and effected some sales. He was received all the better as his fellows had not frequented the district for several years, considering it too near to Paris for visits to be profitable. He showed himself accommodating as to prices, and did not fail to inform himself of houses where he would be likely to dispose of his wares. The people answered him readily, but when he spoke incidentally of the mill on the Yvette, they shook their heads, and became silent. Evidently enough, the occupants of the mill inspired them with a certain terror. Piédouche noticed this, and was strengthened in his resolution not to leave the miller's place till he had discovered its secrets, if there were any. He soon arrived at the ravine of the Yvette, and, like M. Lecoq, he was struck by the savage aspect of the site. The mill was silent, and the false pedlar might have thought that it was uninhabited, had he not noticed at the first glance that smoke was rising from one of the chimneys. He rapidly took in certain data : the Englishman's house, the foot-bridge across the stream, a more substantial one a little higher up, another bridge over the Orge, and at a further distance the château with the two towers which had attracted the attention of M. Lecoq. He then descended into the valley, and crossed the Yvette by the foot-bridge. Just as he reached the right bank, he saw his patron talking with a gendarme at the end of the Englishman's garden. This sight astounded him, and even caused him great disquietude. The gendarmerie meddling in Father Lecoq's affairs was the worst thing imaginable, and Piédouche asked himself for a moment if he would not do well to interfere. But he felt that by doing so he might spoil, and perhaps even ruin everything. However, he was somewhat reassured on seeing that his patron appeared very calm, and that he went away side by side with the man with the cocked hat. It even seemed to him that M. Lecoq, as he walked along, moved his hand behind his back, and he took this as a sign to be prudent. He also said to himself that he would know the meaning of this singular event in the evening, as Louis's father was to be behind the church at ten o'clock, the same as the night before.

"I shall better serve the governor by working here than by running after him," he thought to himself. And without troubling himself any further about the gendarme, who, however, had paid no attention to him, Piédouche approached the door of the mill.

It was not closed, and he walked in as easily as is said in a proverb, which, however, applies to asses and not to men. No one was there to ask him what he wanted, and he was able to examine the place at his ease. It

was the ordinary ground-floor of a mill where grain is converted into flour, with millstones, sacks, hoppers, and stools here and there. A ladder conducted to an open trap-door in the ceiling. There were no windows; the light came in by the door and by the hole which gave access to the floor above, but there was so little of it that the place was dim and shadowy. Piédouche might have profited by the occasion to ferret around in all the corners, and even raise some traps in the floor to see what was in the cellar, but he was endowed with the prudence of serpents, and knew that even abandoned houses sometimes have eyes to watch one. And, then, he only thought of playing his part properly. So he commenced to rap on the floor with his stick by way of announcing his presence, and, at the sound, a woman's head appeared at the hole in the ceiling, and a man's head gently raised one of the traps fitted into the floor. The noise had been heard both upstairs and down. However, Piédouche, who looked up, only saw the woman's head. "Good day, my good lady," he said; "will you buy something of me? I have some fine things here."

A sort of growl replied to this invitation, and the head disappeared. At the same time, the trap which had been raised silently closed again, without the false pedlar having seen anything of this performance. Almost instantly a body glided down the ladder, and a woman, whom one might have thought had fallen from the clouds, stood before Piédouche, astounded by this strange descent. She was a tall, dry creature, with a parchment-like complexion, cavernous eyes, and a large mouth, showing teeth as long as the incisors of a superannuated horse. She was barcheaded, and her badly-combed greyish locks stood out like the quills of a porcupine. A perfect type of a sorceress—a real head of Medusa.

"What do you want?" asked this repulsive vixen, in a hoarse voice.

"You see very well, my good lady," replied Piédouche, humbly. "I have come to sell you some stockings, some handkerchiefs, and some calico."

"We buy nothing here. I have no use for your gew-gaws," yelled the old fury.

That was quite evident, for her legs and neck were bare, and her drugged petticoat did not look in the least as though it covered any more intimate garment. She had, it is true, passed the age when women have a right to be coquettes, and Piédouche at once understood that his imitation pearl necklaces and brass jewelry would have no charms for this amiable personage.

"Now then, clear out; away with you!" she continued, showing him the door.

Ex-number 29, who was very anxious to stay, changed his tune at once. "Don't be angry, little mother," he said gently. "I don't sell dear, but I don't wish to force any one. If I came in here, it was partly because I have a sore foot, to say nothing about my dying from thirst. Can't I drink a glass of wine, and rest for a couple of hours in your flour loft? On paying, that is understood," he added, tapping on his belt, which emitted a metallic sound.

"We don't keep a tavern here," growled the frightful old woman, quickly.

"I know that very well, my good lady," said Piédouche, softly; "but that's no reason why you should refuse the money of a man who only asks to pay for refreshment and rest."

"You have a good deal of money, then, as you are so anxious to spend some?" remarked the old woman, eyeing the pedlar from head to foot.

" Well, the winter's trip hasn't been a bad one. I've already gathered not far from four thousand francs, and if it continues that way this summer, I shall be able to buy the meadow at the end of my garden. I must tell you that I'm a native of Bourg d'Oisans in Dauphiné, and that I already have a little property down there. Ah, of course ! I have not secured it by doing nothing. For fifteen years I have been running over France on foot. A man sees the country in my trade, but he gets awfully tired too. Look here. I came from Palaiseau this morning, and I reckoned on pushing as far as Montlhéry, or, at least, to Saint Michel, by this evening ; but I give it up. I bought some new shoes at the fair at Sceaux, and I got swindled, for they hurt me. I haven't been walking six hours yet, and I already limp. So when I saw your mill, I said to myself : Millers are always good people ; I will go in there, and if I sell nothing, I'll at all events buy something to drink. They always charge less than at a tavern."

" I have only bottled wine ; wine which costs thirty sous the bottle."

" That isn't giving it away, little mother ; but if it's good, it isn't too dear, and I am willing to pay the price."

While answering in this fashion, Piédouche drew from his pocket a little bag, unfastened the strings, and took a five franc piece from among several others. The sly dog had divined that the old woman wished to assure herself of his solvency before serving him, and he asked no better than to show his money. Father Lecoq had plentifully supplied him with specie before leaving Paris, knowing very well that money is the sinew of war, and that in a delicate expedition a man must not expose himself to pecuniary embarrassment. The exhibition had its effect. The old woman's eyes brightened, and her hooked fingers eagerly clutched hold of the five franc piece.

" My faith," said Piédouche, " if you would keep me here till morning, and let me eat some soup with you this evening, I shouldn't ask for any change."

The horrible sorceress was by no means in a hurry to reply to this proposition, but she quickly slipped the silver coin into the depths of her pocket.

" Well, is that a go ? " asked the false pedlar, gaily.

" My man isn't here," mumbled the old woman. " I shall have to talk to him and see if it suits him to keep you to supper and sleep. At all events I'll have the bottle brought up. When you have emptied it, you can leave your pack here, and go and sleep on the grass till Chauffaille returns. He has gone to Corbeil to deliver some flour, and won't be back till evening. Chauffaille is my man."

" That suits me, Madame Chauffaille," exclaimed Piédouche, delighted to be familiar with the old vixen, by calling her by name. At the same time he set his pack on a big pile of empty sacks, as if to take possession of the bed, which, according to all appearances, he was destined to occupy. While he was getting rid of his burden, the old woman walked off a short distance and stamped on the floor. The trap which had already partly opened when Piédouche first came in, was again raised, and the same man's head once more appeared.

" Jacquot," called out the woman, " a bottle of wine and quick."

" There it is," replied Jacquot, and springing from the opening on all fours, he raised himself up.

Piédouche saw that this intelligent servant already brought the bottle

which had been asked for, and he said to himself that the floor of the mill on the Yvette had ears.

"That's something like!" he exclaimed, laughing. "One's served at the word. That isn't the way it was at the tavern where I took a drink on the road."

"In what direction is it, that tavern?" asked the woman, as she worked at the cork with some long scissors hanging from her waistband.

"My faith, I couldn't tell you exactly," replied the pretended pedlar. "It is on the road between Palaiseau and Longjumeau. I don't know the district. This is the first time I pass this way."

The cork gave way; Madame Chauffaille filled a large tin mug, which she had just taken off an empty cask, with wine, and offered it to the pedlar, saying: "At what tavern did you lodge at Palaiseau? I ask you that because I have a cousin who keeps a place in the faubourg."

"The tavern I lodged at had no sign, but if it had one it would be 'A la Belle Etoile,'" replied Piédouche, laughing. "I slept in a barn on some hay. It costs less, and a man isn't obliged to show his papers to get a bed."

"And no one asks you where you are going?" said the old woman, between her teeth.

"Oh, no one. When I go back to my country, if the mayor wants to know where I have been during my trip, it will do him no good to write to places; he will be no further advanced, for I never stop in the towns nor the villages. To your health, Madame Chauffaille."

Piédouche had his reasons for telling this story, and the old woman also had her reasons for questioning him. The answer apparently pleased her, for her scowling face seemed to brighten, and she said, in an almost amiable way: "Take the bottle with you, my boy; and go and finish it on the grass. Down there, along by the river, there's a good place to sleep, under the willows. Jacquot will come for you when my man gets back."

"You are very kind, Madame Chauffaille, and your wine isn't musty. This evening, after supper, you will do me the favour of tasting it with me. In the meanwhile, I'll go and treat myself to a nap."

With these words, Piédouche left the sorceress to confer with Jacquot and went out, not forgetting his bottle. Once outside, he took his way slowly towards the place she had indicated. It was a clump of trees on the opposite bank of the river. He went by the foot-bridge, and attentively examined the outside of the mill on his way. The wheels were not turning, but the sluices were open, and the water was running through the channel, which a wall separated from the river. The pedlar noticed as he passed that this wall seemed to have been recently constructed, and that a system of damming had been introduced, which was somewhat unusual. It resembled a lock, having sluice-gates at both ends. By shutting the upper sluices first, and afterwards the lower ones, the canal was left perfectly dry. It was in that condition when M. Lecoq had seen Jacquot digging a hole there. On opening the gates at both ends, however, a very rapid current was produced, and the water remained at an always equal level. On opening the sluice above and closing that below, the water rose to the height of the wall of separation. The wheels must then have been two-thirds submerged. Piédouche noted all these peculiarities in his mind, and also remarked that in the mill wall there was a long narrow opening, a sort of vent hole at about the same level as the spindles of the wheels. Then, as he did not wish to appear too inquisitive, he passed on and followed the course of the Yvette. He soon reached the clump of trees

which Madame Chauffaille had so obligingly recommended to him. The spot was, in fact, favourable for a siesta, providing one did not wait till dusk, for after sunset the mist, which always rises in damp valleys, must have been very unhealthy there ; still, in broad daylight it was just the place one would select for repose. The sleeper or the muser might there extend himself comfortably on a sloping bank thickly covered with grass, and sheltered by a canopy of verdure. Piédouche, who neither wished to sleep nor muse, laid himself down, lit his pipe, and began looking around on all sides, commencing with the mill. The first thing which attracted his attention was a man crouching on the sill of a dormer window, at the top of the mill roof, and holding with both his hands a long telescope, with which he was looking in the direction of the meadows of the Orge and the forest of Séquigny.

XLIV.

THIS unexpected discovery opened to Piédouche a much more extended horizon than that which was discernible from the top of the mill. In the first place, the man who held the telescope was not Jacquot. Jacquot was slight and loosely built, while the man with the telescope filled the whole width of the window with his burly form. Hidden by his hands and the instrument he held, his face was invisible, but the pedlar divined that it must be that of Chauffaille, the fortunate husband of the woman he had just seen. How was it then that Chauffaille, who was supposed to have gone to Corbeil with some flour, should find himself in the mill on the Yvette ? Why had he gone into the loft like an astronomer to his observatory, or a sailor aloft on his vessel, and why did he use a telescope to examine the surrounding country ? Piédouche did not at once find a solution to these two problems. Certainly the old woman had lied when she said that she was expecting her husband's return—that was evident. It was also sure that this husband had some mysterious habits, and led a life quite at variance with his apparent avocation. What did he expect to see with his glass ? This was more difficult to determine, but Piédouche was greatly interested in knowing. So he turned himself gently on his left side, and while drawing several puffs of smoke from his pipe, which formed a protecting cloud around, he looked attentively at the landscape before him. Beyond the confluence of the two streams, an expanse of meadow land rose gradually to the village of Morsang, the houses of which crowned the slope. A little to the right of the village, a large wood stood out against the sky, and in front of this wood was the château which had been noticed by M. Lecoq. In the meadows round about there were no cattle, sheep, nor shepherds. On the banks of the Orge not a single sportsman, nor even a fisherman.

Now the miller was certainly not looking with the hope of seeing the grass grow, nor for the innocent pleasure of watching the frolicsome fish which frisked in the water. So the object which he examined so closely with his telescope had to be sought for at a greater distance. Piédouche, who had excellent eyes, inspected the houses of Morsang one by one, but saw nothing extraordinary there. They were honest country houses, painted white with green shutters, which were closed on account of the heat, the roofs being covered with tiles or slate, which glistened in the sun. However, the pedlar passed on to the château, and there, at the first glance, he

perceived an immense white flag waving in the wind and fixed to the lightning-rod of one of the pointed towers. Was this flag hoisted to manifest the royalist opinions of the inmates of this manor-house, or merely to indicate, according to the English custom, that the owner was at home? Or was it a signal destined to be seen and understood by the people of the mill? Piédouche was inclined to entertain this last supposition. Soon all his doubts were removed, for the flag slowly descended the length of the lightning-rod, which served it for support, and disappeared. Ex-number 29 at once turned over without rising, and saw that the watcher at the window of the mill was at the same time laying aside his glass and a red rag which he had waved at the end of a pole. Doubt was no longer possible. The aerial telegraphy, which had just ended, showed clearly enough that an understanding existed between the château and the mill. Now this château was inhabited by a couple who hid their lives; and the mill by millers who were almost looked upon as brigands.

So Piédouche had discovered a secret from which he expected great profit, and he was beside himself with delight. He did not yet know how he would make use of his discovery, but he was firmly determined not to leave this interesting district till he had completely cleared up the mystery. It must be mentioned that he already had his romance prepared; a romance, the outlines of which had been given him by Father Lecoq, and which was in a fair way to become a matter of fact. Piédouche was only astonished that the Englishman's house had not been included in this exchange of signals, for in the plot devised by M. Lecoq, this Englishman played a most important part. But the difficulty did not lie there. He had not been charged with visiting George Atkins. His mission was limited to studying the millers, and he had no wish to go beyond it. Besides, his employer must already know what to expect about the drunkard, since he had already seen him. But Piédouche found himself placed in the unpleasant alternative of failing to keep his appointment with M. Lecoq in the evening, or of leaving the mill just at the time when it was most important for him to be there.

"Bah!" he said to himself, "the governor will understand that I don't sleep here for my pleasure. Perhaps he doesn't even care to meet me on the Place de l'Eglise, where we should be exposed to being spied upon by old Fouineux. And then, who knows but what he may come sauntering round here this afternoon? At all events I'll find some means of seeing him to-morrow. The gendarme must have bothered him no doubt, but he will get out of that. The passports Pigache got for us are certainly in form if papers ever were. So I'm decided; I shall stay."

At this resolution, he took a comfortable position on the grass, put out his pipe, and pretended to sleep. It was certainly the best thing he could do, for on the one hand the miller, warned by his wife, was no doubt watching him from the loft, and, on the other hand, it was evident that nothing of interest would transpire till night had fallen. But it was very warm, Piédouche was tired, and had almost emptied a bottle of wine which was very heady, so it happened that the good fellow fell fast asleep in reality. No one, however, came to disturb him; he might have dreamed of Tolbiac, of the beautiful Disney, or of the abominable old woman of the mill just as he pleased, but the truth is that his sleep was not troubled by dreams, and that it lasted six hours. When he awoke, the day was already closing. Astonished to find himself in the same place, and to have remained there so long, Piédouche hastened to rise and return to the mill. He feared that he had missed meal time, and he asked himself how it was that the

old woman had forgotten him. In the country, as a rule, supper is not served so late, as by way of economising light, people go to bed with the sun. But the folks at the mill on the Yvette did nothing the same as others. On crossing the foot-bridge, the pedlar saw Jacquot in the channel underneath him, his feet in the water and his hands occupied in repairing the rotten boards of the lower sluice-gates. He was careful not to disturb him, and continuing on his way he found the old woman stationed at the mill-door.

"Hurry up!" she cried out as soon as he came in sight, "I was going to send my boy after you."

"Excuse me if I have kept you from eating you soup," said Piédouche.

"Soup! I swallowed mine long ago; there is none left, and I don't intend to make any more for you. My man hasn't come back from Corbeil. He won't return this evening. So you can munch your bread and bacon without him and me. That's all I have to offer you," she added, pointing to a plate placed on the head of an empty cask.

"With that and a bottle of wine, I shall sup like a king," replied the pedlar; but he thought to himself: "You old rascal! your scoundrel of a husband isn't far off, but I'm not afraid of him, and I'll keep my eye on you, for something will happen here to-night, sure."

The bottle he had asked for was there, already uncorked by the thoughtful old woman who hastened to fill her guest's glass. Piédouche had woke up with a dry mouth and an empty stomach. He therefore did honour to this rural repast, which he ate standing, and emptied the bottle to the last drop.

The old woman looked at him with her little round eyes, like an owl looks at a blackbird it would like to make a meal of.

"Your bed is ready," she grumbled as soon as he had finished. "There, on those sacks. You will be as well there as on the hay."

"Better, Madame Chauffaille. Give me time to scorch my pipe outside, so as not to smoke you in here, and I'll come back and get in between the sheets—the sacks I mean."

"Go and smoke if you like, but don't be too long about it. In half an hour I shall barricade the door, and so much the worse for those who are not inside.

Piédouche promised not to stay long, and went out. He felt a need of taking the air, and especially of examining the surroundings of the mill before he allowed himself to be shut up in it. Night was falling, and he could not go far. Still he wished to go as far as the clump of trees under which he had slept so well, and he crossed the wooden bridge. Just as he set his foot on the other bank of the Yvette it seemed to him that he heard a voice singing, a sweet but feeble voice, the sound of which barely reached him.

XLV.

Piédouche, astonished, and even somewhat troubled, immediately stopped and listened. This voice did not seem to come from very far, and, nevertheless, it was scarcely distinct. It was a murmur rather than a song. Æolian harps make just such sounds when the wind sweeps across their strings, and the pedlar was tempted to think that the melody he heard descended from the clouds. But he listened with more attention, and then it

seemed to him, on the contrary, to come from somewhere underground. He even thought that he recognised the words of this mysterious song. It was one of those ditties sung by little girls as they go round in a circle, holding each other's hands. He asked himself where he had heard this tune which awakened his memory ; but the sounds grew gradually more faint, like an echo which becomes more and more remote, and finally ceased. Then Piédouche, hearing nothing further, sought to explain to himself this singular singing. Underneath the foot-bridge there was the cellar-wall of the mill, and the channel through which trickled a small stream of water joining the river a little farther down. Jacquot, having finished his work, had disappeared, and, besides, these angelic sounds had certainly not escaped from *his* throat. Piédouche ended by imagining that he had been the dupe of an illusion, of a musical reminiscence, as sometimes happens to a person who has passed the night at a ball, and who, while half asleep, again hears, amid the noise made by the wheels of passing vehicles, the tunes of the quadrilles he has danced.

"It was the stream which sang as it flowed over the stones," he said, talking to himself. "Can I have drank too much? The old woman's wine isn't bad, but it goes to the head. I'll walk a little to make it pass off." And, quickening his steps, he started towards the trees, at the feet of which he had slept so long.

Night had fallen, and the planet Venus shone brightly in the sky still almost clear ; but the mist was rising in the two valleys, a greyish mist, which extended little by little over the meadows, and silvered the feeble glimmer of the new moon. Damp gusts of wind swept the surface of the ground, and Piédouche soon felt himself wet to the bones.

"Br! Br!" he said, shaking himself, "I feel as though I had already swam the two rivers ; and I believe, the devil run away with me ! that my pipe is going out. If I continue to loiter in this frog-hole, I shall get inflammation of the chest, and that won't be helping the governor's affairs. I must go back, especially as the old woman must be getting impatient, and if she shut me out, I should be nicely cheated."

He was about to retrace his steps when, a hundred paces before him, near the confluent of the two rivers, he thought he saw a white form moving slowly. He did not believe in ghosts, but, nevertheless, he experienced a somewhat disagreeable sensation on seeing this form gradually emerge out of the mist. The apparition had certainly the aspect and movement of a phantom. It trailed a long shroud, and seemed to glide over the grass of the meadow.

Piédouche rubbed his eyes and murmured, "Well, there ! now I am losing my sight. Decidedly, I drank too much. It troubles my eyes. And yet—no—I am not dreaming. It is all white ; it has the appearance of being six feet high, and seems to advance without walking. Ghosts have never been described otherwise. The people of Savigny who told me those stories didn't invent them, it seems. All the same, that jackanapes there doesn't scare me, and I have a good mind to go and tear his white hood off, to have a look at his mug. Unfortunately, he is on the other side of the Orge, and I should be obliged to make a long detour to get to him. But what can he be doing in that meadow ? He doesn't leave the bank of the river. One might say that he was on guard there." And, after reflecting a moment, Piédouche added, between his teeth : "In fact, why not ? It is a good way of keeping passers-by at a distance. The locality has a bad reputation, and the country people would go and tell everybody that they

had seen a phantom walking near the mill. I have an idea that he has something to do with the mill, that phantom, and that the night will not pass without my learning considerably. Another reason why I should go in : if I amuse myself with running after that sheet, I risk having to sleep outside."

And without further occupying himself with the spectre, the good fellow rapidly returned to the mill. Others would not have been in such a hurry to be shut up inside it ; but when a man has been in the marine infantry and the detective service, he is no more afraid of bandits than of ghosts. Piédouche was vigorous and active. He had an intrepid spirit, and a revolver in his pocket, to say nothing about a strong, well-tempered and well-pointed dirk-knife. So the miller, his wife, and their boy Jacquot, gave him no fear. He was only sorry that he had drank Madame Chauffaille's wine, for he felt that his head was heavy and his limbs enervated.

"It is the damp which has affected me," he muttered. "As soon as I am under shelter, it will pass off."

He reached the mill without having again heard the voice which seemed to be singing underground, and without turning round to see what had become of the ghost. The old woman had lit a candle, and was seated on a rickety stool.

"Ah ! there you are !" she grumbled, "it isn't unfortunate. The door of the mill ought to have been shut an hour ago."

"My faith, Madame Chauffaille," said the pedlar, laughing, "you will do as well to bolt the door. There is a ghost prowling about down there in the meadow. I don't care to have it come in here and drag me out by the heels."

"A ghost !" exclaimed the old woman. "You are as stupid as the rest then ? You must have seen the white mare which belongs to Father Mathurin, and you thought of the stories told you by the people round about."

"No, no, Madame Chauffaille, it wasn't a mare ; but don't be alarmed, I don't believe old women's stories, and what I have just seen on the bank of the river won't prevent me from sleeping."

"That's the way to talk !" grumbled the woman. "Your bed is made ; go and lie down so that I can go up to the loft. It isn't worth while to use the candle for nothing. Jacquot is already snoring, and in five minutes I shall do the same."

Piédouche asked no better than to lie down, but he had not the least idea of going to sleep. He had a presentiment that the night would not elapse without event. He also wished to watch the millers and the people who might visit them before sunrise. And as he realised that the old woman was going to leave him in the dark, he profited by the moments remaining to him before she carried away the candle. With one glance, rapid and sure, he examined the room so as not to be embarrassed in case of a nocturnal attack. One half of the apartment was occupied by the millstones, the sacks, and the cask which had served him as a dining-table. Piédouche at once noticed that the dimensions of the room did not correspond with those of the building as seen from outside, and divined that behind a partition at the end there must be a small room accessible from above, the partition itself having no door. His bed, which was made of empty sacks, extended beside this partition, and his pack, placed at the head, was to serve him as a pillow. The trap by which Jacquot entered and left the cellar was some two yards from the bed, and the ladder, which served as a stair-

way to reach the loft, stood still farther off. So the place was a good one to sleep in peace, as the sleeper was neither exposed to being precipitated into the cellar by Jacquot's trap, nor to being crushed by anything falling from the upper floor. While the pedlar was arranging himself in this somewhat rude bed, Madame Chauffaille locked the outside door and further fastened it with a strong wooden bar. When she had thus taken her precautions against foes from outside, she climbed the ladder with the agility of a monkey, and gliding into the loft she called out to her tenant : "Good-night ! I will wake you at daylight."

The trap above was then at once closed, and Piédouche found himself in total darkness. He had no right to be sleepy, for he had passed a great portion of the day in slumber, and, nevertheless, he experienced some singular sensations.

XLVI.

WHEN Piédouche had returned to the mill after his long nap, his head already felt heavy, as is the case after sleeping too much during the daytime. But this weight which oppressed his brain had greatly increased since he had eaten his supper, and especially since he had laid down. The blood throbbed in his temples. He had a ringing in his ears and pricking sensations in his eyes. In a word, he felt an indefinable uneasiness, which he tried to battle against by sitting up, but this only increased it. He then wished to rise altogether ; and failed to succeed, falling back into a horizontal position in spite of himself. Then commenced for him a species of torture which was as strange as painful. Physically, he felt throbbings in his head and cramps in all his limbs. He seemed to see flashes of red light, which died out only to flash again. At moments he also felt as though his head were swelling and about to burst. Intellectually, it was much worse. His mind, very lucid and very sagacious, became rapidly obscured ; his ideas were confused ; he was gradually losing his memory of past events, and realized that he was doing so, although he made desperate efforts to retain it. Soon he began to ask himself where he was, why he was extended there on empty flour sacks instead of being in his own room at Paris, in the midst of his young 'uns. He already failed to recall the events of the day, and had forgotten the object of his journey. M. Lecoq, his son Louis, Tolbiac, the Englishwoman Arabella, Cambremier, Mademoiselle Lecomte, and the atrocious old woman of the mill, passed and repassed in his troubled mind like the slides of a magic lantern. He recognized them, he could have called them by name, but he was unable to account for their actions. He had been drunk more than once in his life, but he had never felt like that. The sensations he experienced were such as must be the lot of a person about to become insane. It was, fortunately, but a passing alienation of mind, an hallucination produced by the absorption of some drug. The smokers of opium and hasheesh are hallucinated similarly.

However, if Piédouche's strength was paralyzed, his senses, on the contrary, had acquired extraordinary acuteness. The slightest noise reverberated in his ears like an explosion. His eyes saw in the dark, like the eyes of a cat. Only, he was not sure that he saw, and that he really heard. To him it was all a dream, and as he had also lost all idea of time, it would have been impossible for him to have told how many hours or minutes he had been lying down, when suddenly a ray of light shone through a crack

in the partition against which his face happened to be turned. But he had the instinct to look through the crack, and he imagined that he espied by the light of a smoking lamp the old woman of the mill, sitting opposite a man who, to judge by his face, must have been the vixen's worthy husband. This man was about six feet tall, with colossal shoulders and the face of an escaped convict. He was drinking brandy out of an iron mug, and his wife kept him company. How had they entered this hiding place, between the partition and the outside wall of the building? What did they go there for? Piédouche was not capable of solving these two problems, but he watched every movement made by the horrid couple. And he heard, or imagined he heard, the conversation between this man and his wife as distinctly as though he had been seated beside them.

"The Red Man ought to be already here," said the husband, striking with his fist on the table. "Is he going to keep us here all night?"

"It isn't late," replied the woman, "and then he can only leave Paris at night, and he needs at least two hours to come as far as the bridge of the Orge in his 'trap.'"

"And if he misses this time as he did before, we shall again have to kick our heels together. That Red Man's nothing but a coward; he is nothing like as good as the red man of Annean my grandfather knew."

"We mustn't speak ill of him. He feeds us."

"No doubt; but with his inventions he will finish by sending us to the guillotine. It is enough to make one sweat, to force us to keep the brats that bother him, instead of twisting their necks at once."

"Bah! as it is for to-night, we shall soon be rid of them."

"We shall see. And that other manœuvre of carrying them to the railroad when they are cold."

"To make it seem as if a locomotive had run over them. That isn't a bad idea, and he takes charge of getting them there. We risk nothing."

"No, if he throws the carcasses five or six leagues from here; but I mistrust the stingy fool. He hasn't any blood in his veins."

"It's true, everybody can't be the grandson of No-Thumb, like you, my man."

"And that goose the Red Man drags about with him; do you think that she is worth as much as you—you, who descend from Cut-and-Hew?"

"And from Beautiful Victoire, the daughter of old One-Eye. No, my man, as true as my grandfather and grandmother were shortened on the great square at Chartres, the Red Man's girl isn't worth as much as me."

"If you like, when the business is done and that blackguard has settled up with us, we will set the mill in a blaze, and get out and go to some part where we can still work on the high road."

"There's no longer any such part. The police are everywhere. One cannot saunter on a road to settle a fool's account without a cocked hat asking for your papers."

"Did you see the one that came this morning to the Englishman's?"

"It was not for the Englishman. It was for the chap you spotted from the loft."

"That chap looked to me as though he belonged to the police. Another reason for clearing out when the job is over. The Red Man will pay up to-night. As soon as we have the coin, we will clear off."

"He won't pay up till we have fished out the brats, for he wants to put them in his trap to take them and lay them on the railroad."

"Good! but he will have to start before daylight. So we shall have

time. There's a fellow who changes his mind. He told us in the first place to have a trench dug by Jacquot at the bottom of the channel, and then to-day he tells us that the hole will be of no use."

"Oh, well, so much the worse ; it will be of use all the same."

"Who for ?"

"For the pedlar who's snoring there close by."

"You intend, then, to do for him ?"

"Do I intend to ! there are a thousand francs in his belt, without speaking of the merchandise. And everything's ready. I've peppered his wine. He will go and take a drink at the big cup with the others, and to-morrow evening, when the Red Man's carried away his brats, we will dry the race, put him in the trench, and then raise the upper sluices. The folks will be cunning who unearth him under three feet of water."

"Then he will have to take the leap before the Red Man arrives ; and the Red Man won't be much longer. I have seen the signal, and his woman is already prowling along the Orge with a sheet on her head."

"The same that the pedlar saw and spoke to me about."

"Are you sure he can't hear us ?"

"No danger. At present he must be dreaming that he is arriving in his country, in Dauphiné, with a pretty heap of coin, and, even if he heard us, he could not stir. The wine was doctored, as I told you. He is lying in a good place, and I have only to touch the spring for him to make a somersault into the cellar. And once he is there, forward with the water."

"Jacquot is at the sluices ?"

"He has been there an hour already."

"Good ! then all will go right. Pour me out a drink of brandy."

Piédouche had not lost a word of this edifying dialogue, and although certain allusions were not very clear to him, he perfectly understood the general sense. Slang had no mysteries for him ; he even understood the old-fashioned terms used by the miller and his wife, whose references to those famous Chauffeur chiefs, No-Thumb, Cut-and-Hew, One-Eye, etc., showed that they were the last offsprings of the bands of brigands which laid the district of the Beauce fairly waste under the First Republic and the Directory. So he had caught the plan of this pair of scoundrels ; he no longer doubted that Tolbiac had inspired it, and that he was to play an active part in the abominations which were being prepared. Only, he was not quite sure that he was awake, and he asked himself if he were not dreaming all that he saw and heard. When the old woman spoke of the trick she had played him in peppering his wine he made a supreme effort to rise, but his limbs refused him service. While he struggled against the strange paralysis which held him fast to his bed, he heard the distant sound of a horn, and almost immediately afterwards he saw the frightful old sorceress extend her arm. At the same moment the floor gave way underneath him, and he felt himself precipitated into space.

XLVII.

ON losing his equilibrium, Piédouche also lost the sense of the situation. He vaguely felt that he was falling, that he was turning over, and, finally, that he experienced a shock. Then he felt nothing more. When he regained his senses, his hands came in contact with a friable substance with which he found that his mouth was so filled that he was unable to cry out.

At last, however, he shook himself, raised himself up, spat, and by feeling about realised what had befallen him. He had fallen on a pile of sand, and his head, having struck first, had been imbedded in the sand as far as his ears. It was a miracle that he had not been suffocated. Misfortune is good for something, says the proverb. Piédouche, who but a few minutes before had ineffectually tried to collect his ideas—Piédouche, who had been neither asleep nor awake, now found himself in a satisfactory condition. His fall had restored him to lucidity. He knew perfectly well that he had not been dreaming, and recollects distinctly what had happened to him. He understood that the old woman had played a trick on him; that the bed prepared by her hands was laid over a trap-door, and that she had only to extend her arm to touch a spring, and precipitate her tenant into the subterranean depths of the mill. She had waited for the signal which announced Tolbiac's arrival to carry out her purpose—for the person whom she called the Red Man could be none other than Tolbiac; and the deed having been accomplished, the existence of ex-number 29 only hung by a thread. They had evidently not thrown him into a cellar to keep and feed him. This cellar was to be his grave; he could not doubt it. Would they come to kill him, or would they leave him to die of hunger? He did not know, but he was quite certain that they would not allow him to leave. It was not because the brigands of the mill had taken him for a spy that they had thrown him into this dungeon-like den; it was solely to appropriate his merchandise and his purse. Now his purse was in his pocket, and his pack, which had served him for a pillow, must have tumbled with him. It was then probable that these villains would descend into the cellar to despoil their victim.

"They must think that I have broken my neck in falling," thought Piédouche, "or that if I am not dead, I am not much better. They will come with the intention of finishing me; but, by Jove! they will find out that they have caught a Tartar." At the same time, he felt his belt, and found with pleasure that his revolver and knife were in their places. For the moment he found himself seated on the heap of sand which had fortunately broken his fall. Around him, all was in complete darkness. His first idea was to get on his feet and explore the cellar into which he had been brutally thrown, but reflection held him back. He said to himself that the only chance remaining to him for escaping his murderers was to let them think that the shock had killed him, and pretend to be dead, so as to deceive them. He presumed that at the appointed time they would come by the trap, or by some secret way; that they would arrive with a lantern in one hand and a poniard in the other; that seeing him extended on the sand they would approach him without suspicion, and that he would then have a good chance to throw himself on them unawares. While if they surprised him exploring his prison, they would not fail to resort to some other means for ridding themselves of him. Nothing could prevent them from waiting till he died of hunger, or, if they were in a hurry to finish the job, they might illuminate the cellar by throwing burning straw into it, or kill him by shooting at him through some loop-hole with a gun or a pistol. It was even probable that they would, from preference, employ the most violent and expeditious means, for they no doubt would be in a hurry to get his money. Having passed a few seconds in reasoning like this, Piédouche resolved to lie still. He again placed himself on his back in a natural and easy position, his eyes turned towards the ceiling, so as not to be surprised when the trap opened. Then he took his weapons from his belt. He

opened his knife, cocked his revolver, and waited without alarm for the moment when he would have to fight, one against two ; perhaps even one against three, for the horrible old witch was just the woman to take a hand in the affair.

"It was that old wretch who drugged the wine she poured out for me," soliloquised poor Piédouche. "I ought to have suspected it and have drank nothing but water, but a man doesn't think of everything. What can she have made me swallow ? Already, after drinking the first bottle, it seemed to me that I was carrying a hundred pound weight on my head ; and just now, when I was lying down up-stairs, I saw and heard a heap of things. Everything danced before my eyes and sang in my ears. But now, I feel scarcely anything. That tumble I took sobered me. I have not been poisoned, for if I had been I should already have had the colic. But I hope the devil may run away with me if I understand all this." And he tried to recall his recollections from the moment he had commenced to feel these strange sensations which had just terminated. "Suppose I have been dreaming, however," he muttered. "That ghost which was walking on the bank of the Orge—that conversation between Mother Chauffaille and her man. Suppose I merely thought that I was awake, while, on the contrary, I was asleep, dreaming. And my fall, suppose that was an accident ? I perchance rolled, while moving about, to a trap-door, which the mill-boy had forgotten to close." And he even went so far as to ask himself if he were not still dreaming, even while he questioned himself. "No," he resumed, "no, I am not crazy ; I am not a somnambulist ; and I am no longer under the influence of liquor. I certainly saw what I thought I saw, heard what I believed I heard. I am certainly at the bottom of a cellar, which they made me fall into ; as proof of it, my bed tumbled with me. There, under my hand, I can feel one of the sacks which served me for a mattress, and, under my feet, my pack, which served me for a pillow. And thus, all holds together. I had only drank one glass of wine when I saw the miller with his spy-glass, and the signal made to him from the château near the forest. The ghost is a member of the gang who prowls about with a sheet on his head, to scare the passers-by and prevent them from coming near the mill. They are preparing for something here, something to be done to-night—they said so, the brigands. The woman talked of some one they were going to bring—to murder, that's sure ; of bodies they were going to throw on the railway line, so that they might be crushed by a train—just as nearly happened to Cambremer's little girl. Suppose it was she they meant ; but no, three days have elapsed since she disappeared, they must have despatched her. Could it be Mademoiselle Lecomte ? No, nor her either. They missed her once. She must be on her guard now. Besides, the governor warned her. And yet it wasn't a question of myself when the husband and wife talked about their affairs. It was the old woman who had the idea of putting me out of the way to rob me ; a speculation, of course. But it isn't for that that the man at the château pays them. Tolbiac is the man at the château, and he is perhaps up-stairs. They were waiting to work for him, and they don't grumble at the work either, these millers, spawn of the old *chauffeur* gang, children of guillotined bandits, who will end like their grandfathers and grandmothers did. Ah, if I only get out of here, I shall have lots to tell the governor. To think that he is now waiting behind the church at Savigny, and swearing at me. And I shall also have some information for the folks at the Prefecture. I shall be able to tell them that five leagues from Paris there is a mill where murders are under-

taken by contract. That will make a hubbub at the ‘establishment’ and no mistake. If I wished to return to the service, I’m sure they would take me back.”

The mental monologue to which Piédouche had abandoned himself was at this point interrupted by a sound which made the good fellow start. The sound was nevertheless a feeble one. One would have said a sigh, a breath. But it troubled ex-number 29 a hundred times more than he would have been troubled by the opening of the trap-door. Was the cellar inhabited, then? Piédouche, who was very anxious to know, held his breath and listened attentively. The breathing changed into a plaintive murmur, and then the murmur became a song. A very soft and suppressed song; a vague melody, something like the far-off sound of a horn in the depths of a forest. Soon, however, Piedouche recognised the tune and the words which had reached his ear as he was crossing the foot-bridge.

XLVIII.

THIS is what the voice, a child’s voice, sang :

“ We were three maids of France,
Maidens fit to marry,
And we loved to tarry
In the fields to dance—”

Piédouche could not recover from his astonishment. Where had he heard this childish roundelay? He could not remember; and, yet, this tune and these words awakened some recollections within him.

“ Raise your feet with motion fleet
Ah! how pleasant ‘tis to dance!”

continued the voice.

At the refrain, Piédouche’s memory returned to him. “It is Marthe,” he murmured; “it’s Cambremer’s little girl. She sang that same ditty on the day they tried to get her away while I was drinking some beer with her father near the gate of the Jardin des Plantes.” He had spoken very low, but the vaulted roof of the cellar re-echoed the slightest sound. The singer, alarmed, at once became silent again. However, Piédouche could not remain in incertitude. It was absolutely necessary that he should know how matters stood. He had some matches and a piece of candle in his pocket which he had not yet dared to use for fear of attracting the attention of the villains who had thrown him into this dungeon. But in view of the urgency of the case, he determined to run the risk of being seen. Hardly had he struck his match than a feeble cry of terror came from the further part of the cellar, and by the flickering light of his candle he perceived the switchman’s little daughter crouching in a corner. The poor child was seated on the bare ground, her knees drawn up and her chin resting upon them. She looked with an air of sadness at the light which dazzled her, and at the man who stood before her and whom she no doubt took for one of her persecutors. Piédouche recognised her at the first glance, although she was greatly changed, and he also understood that she was afraid of him.

“Help, father!” cried the poor child, as soon as she saw the false pedlar prepare to advance towards her. She evidently did not in the least remember having seen him with Cambremer. His change of dress was no doubt the cause of this.

"Don't be afraid, little one," Piédouche said quickly. "I have come to get you out of here. I am a friend of your father's."

"You," muttered the little one.

"So you have forgotten then that you saw me with him once at the café near the Pont d'Austerlitz."

Marthe gave a cry of joy, and was about to rise to throw her arms round the neck of her unknown deliverer, when the trap which was above their heads grated on its hinges.

"Not a word," breathed Piedouche. "Pretend to be asleep. I will make believe that I am dead."

At the same time, he hastened to extinguish his candle and to throw himself on his face. It was as well he did so, for almost immediately a lantern attached to a cord was let down through the trap. This lantern moved about for a few moments close to the ground. Those who held it wished to see from above how things looked at the bottom of the cellar. They must have been satisfied. Piédouche was lying with his arms extended and his legs bent under him, in the position of a man who has been killed in falling. Marthe, drawn up in her corner, her face against the wall, motionless and mute, looked as though she was about to die.

"Their account is settled," said a sneering voice. "Send them the other one to keep them company."

Piédouche opened one eye and espied suspended over his head a body bound and wrapped up in a coarse cloth, like a corpse about to be thrown into the sea. The next moment the body touched the ground, and the lantern commenced to ascend again. In the wink of an eye it disappeared, the trap was closed, and a dull sound warned the prisoner that it was being covered with things of sufficient weight to resist all efforts to raise it. Superfluous precaution, however, as it was at least fifteen feet from the cellar floor to the ceiling and no ladder was available.

"We are now immured," thought Piédouche. "The tomb is sealed, the brigands will return no more." And, without hesitation, he once more had recourse to his matches. He had quickly arrived at the correct conclusion that the bandits of the mill would take no further trouble about their prisoners, who appeared to be incapable of trying to escape. So he could act without fear of being watched, and he commenced by relighting his candle. He was in a hurry to see who was this companion in misfortune they had just sent him, this unfortunate being whom they had buried, dead or alive, in this tomb, where Cambremer's little daughter already moaned. He leaned over this body so securely bound and wrapped up, and perceived at once that it was that of a woman. The lower part of her face was hidden by a thick handkerchief, which had served as a gag, and her dishevelled hair fell over her forehead. Her hands were bound across her breast. Piédouche unfastened the handkerchief, brushed aside the hair, and at once recognised the charming face he had never forgotten since the fatal day on which he had arrested Louis Lecoq. Thérèse Lecomte was before him, pale and dejected, but living. She looked at him, and no doubt believed that he was preparing to destroy her, for she closed her beautiful eyes and murmured : "Kill me, but do not make me suffer."

Worthy Piedouche lost no time in reassuring the young girl. In such cases, actions are better than words. He cut the cords which bound her, delivered her from the kind of shroud which enveloped her, and helped her to sit up.

"Where am I?" she murmured.

"In the hands of villains who would like to serve you and I and the little one over there a bad turn," replied Piédouche. "Depend on me, mademoiselle. I will wrest you from their clutches."

"Who are you, sir? It seems to me that I have seen you before."

"Yes, once. I will tell you where when we are out of here. But I can tell you at once that I am the friend of M. Lecoq."

"Of Louis?"

"No, of his father. I will bet that they made use of the name of Lecoq to lead you into the trap they set for you."

"You know that?"

"I guess it. They no doubt came to tell you that M. Lecoq wished to speak to you, that he awaited you in a carriage."

"At the entrance to the Bois de Boulogne. I ought to have mistrusted them—for already one evening they attempted to carry me off by force; but I did not think of danger—I only thought of Louis—I was alone—and I followed the man who brought me the message."

"And hardly had you entered the carriage than they threw themselves on you: then they gagged you?"

"Without my being able to cry out."

"And the horses started off, and they brought you here in less than two hours?"

"I don't know. I became partially unconscious. I only noticed that after what seemed to me a very long journey, the carriage stopped in a deserted neighbourhood. Then they took me out and put me into a boat."

"The men who were with you got in too?"

"Yes."

"And they came up the river as far as the mill, while one of the party, disguised as a ghost, walked along the bank to prevent the country people from approaching. Ah! there's nobody but that brigand Tolbiac who could have arranged such an affair."

"Tolbiac?" repeated Mademoiselle Lecomte mechanically.

"Yes, a villain who intends you harm, you and the little one. I will explain that to you when we are in Paris—as yet I don't know very well how we shall manage to get there, but I will find a way."

"Save this child in the first place."

"If I save her, I will save you, too, and myself into the bargain. And it will be to-night or never, for the rascals must wish to rid themselves of us as soon as possible. I have reasons for being sure of that—reasons which I cannot explain to you now."

Indeed, Piédouche could not tell a young girl and a child that Tolbiac awaited their death to obtain the millions of Major O'Sullivan for himself or an accomplice. But he remembered what had been said by the old woman, while she was talking to her husband, about the infernal project conceived by their master. Tolbiac, she had stated, intended that the bodies of these two innocent victims should be taken away and laid on the railway line so that they might be crushed by a locomotive. And Tolbiac was certainly in a hurry, so that this project would undoubtedly be put into execution before the morning.

XLI.

"How will they kill us?" Piédouche asked himself. "If I were alone in this hole, they wouldn't trouble themselves to come and finish me, they

would just leave me to die of hunger, for they have my valise. They have no need of my carcass, and they are sure to find my purse in my pocket when I have reversed arms. But they have these heirs, and they wish them dead. If they haven't killed them elsewhere it is because they prefer to kill them here. By what means? I have no idea. By hunger? That would take too long—besides, they have given the little Cambremer some food. I saw some bread and a pitcher of water beside her just now. Will they descend through the trap door to put an end to us? That will suit me, for I can receive them with shots from my revolver. But that isn't probable. Why do they wait?"

While he thus examined the chances which remained to him, a fresh idea entered his mind. "Tolbiac is certainly ignorant that I am in this cellar," he said to himself. "The miller and his witch of a wife haven't bragged to him of the trick they have played me. This is a little speculation they have gone into on their own account, and is quite apart from the programme laid down by the master who pays them. Tolbiac will owe them a fine reward if I leave my bones in the mill on the Yvette; but he will never know that I came here. At least they hope so: and if they hope so it is because they have devised some ingenious means of despatching me without noise. What means? I don't know, and I'm not going to amuse myself by trying to find out. It would be better to try and get away before they use it." And Piédouche set to work exploring the cellar.

It was a somewhat spacious cellar, which had served for the storage of wine and firewood in the time when the mill was occupied by real millers. But it now contained nothing but some faggots and some empty casks. Piédouche searched it thoroughly, examined the wall closely, and found that there was no door. It could only be entered or left by the trap above. Nevertheless, he felt a current of fresh, damp air, which must penetrate in a way which he could not perceive. He had left his candle in the corner where the little Marthe was seated, as he was afraid of being caught, *flagrante delicto*, in trying to escape. Thérèse Lecomte watched over this precious candle. She had gone and sat down close to Cambremer's daughter, and, forgetting her own troubles, she tried to console and comfort the poor child, who could scarcely keep up.

By looking steadily upward, Piédouche at last noticed a sort of light streak amid the darkness around. "There must be a vent-hole up there," he thought. "That is where the air I feel comes from. Where does it lead to, that hole? Probably on to the river, or rather to the artificial channel formed by the dam. It seems to me that I saw, from the footbridge, a long narrow opening in the wall, just behind the wheels which never turn."

This discovery seemed to improve matters, and Piédouche continued: "That's the real way to get out of here. I'm not stout, nor the young lady either, and the little one still less. We could easily pass through the opening, if it isn't guarded by a grating. It only remains to get up there, and I saw some casks we could make use of, by piling them one on the top of the other. But what astonishes me is that the rascals did not think of that opening. Bah! the Chauffailles fancy that I have broken my neck; Tolbiac knows that the young lady has her feet and hands tied, and that the little one is already half dead. Now, all we have to do is to go off without waiting to say good-bye."

While reasoning thus, he stood close to the wall precisely under the opening through which he hoped to escape. All at once, he received such

a splash of water right in his face, that he became wet from head to foot. He sprang backward, and asked himself anxiously whence this unlooked-for cascade could have come from. He understood, but too soon, the cause of this seeming phenomenon. A dull murmur, a sound of splashing, and another spurt of water, falling into the cellar, apprised him that the river had reached the level of the vent-hole.

"Oh, the villains!" he exclaimed; "they have raised the upper sluices, and lowered the under ones. The channel will be filled; and, in filling it, the water will overflow into this cellar. We are just going to be drowned like rats. And so this is why they didn't kill anyone. They knew that the water would rid them of us. It is already at the level of the opening, in half-an-hour the cellar will be filled to the ceiling, and we shall be suffocated."

Alarmed and troubled, Piédouche returned to the corner where Thérèse and Marthe were sitting close in each other's arms. Mademoiselle Lecomte was trying to impart some warmth to the poor child, and, at the same time, covered her with kisses. She had just asked her her name, and the little one had answered her. "My name is Marthe Cambremer."

"Marthe," repeated Thérèse. "Marthe Cambremer, whom I wished so much to know."

"Yes," said Piédouche, quietly, "you are relatives, and that is why they wish to kill you. Do you see what is taking place here?"

The water now entered in a continuous stream, and by degrees covered the floor of the cellar. It already extended to the four walls of this subterranean prison, which was soon to be transformed into a cistern. The opening being placed several feet below the height of the dam, and the stream which filled the race being of considerable volume, the inundation would be complete and rapid.

"We are lost," murmured Thérèse.

"Not yet," replied Piédouche, through whose mind a new idea just darted.

He quickly seized the candle held by Mademoiselle Lecomte, and ran to the place where he had seen the casks. There were three or four of them standing against the wall. Piédouche assured himself that they were empty by kicking them with his foot. To make life-buoys of these old casks only required that they should be prevented from filling while floating. But the bungs had been taken out, and it was necessary to replace them. How was that to be done? Just then Piédouche espied the sacks which had served him for a bed. He picked up one of them, ripped it into strips with his knife, and used the pieces to stop up the casks; this took but a moment. He then rolled the three casks thus plugged into the middle of the cellar. A little lake had already formed there, and was visibly growing larger. Piédouche then went to Thérèse, who was already on her feet, for she understood his design, and, taking her by the hand, he said to her: "Mademoiselle, we have but one resource left. The water will rise very fast. If you feel that you have the strength and the courage to throw yourself on one of these casks and hold yourself there, you are saved."

"And this child?" asked Mademoiselle Lecomte, pointing to Marthe.

"I will take charge of her," replied the worthy fellow, "and of you also, mademoiselle. I will put the little one on another cask; and will swim between the two. I will watch so that you don't fall off, and will endeavour to struggle against the current which will certainly oppose us when we try to reach the opening. There will be a bad moment to pass then, but it

won't last long, and as soon as the water is level with the vent-hole I will manœuvre to get out. If the opening is too narrow to allow the casks to pass through, you must place your hands on my shoulders, the little one must do the same, then both hold tight, and we will let ourselves float out with the water. Don't be afraid, I can swim like a porpoise. We will get out without accident, I promise you."

"I am ready," said Thérèse, simply.

"And you, Marthe?"

"I will do whatever you please," replied the little one raising her head.
"I remember you now, I have seen you with father."

"I hope that to-morrow you will embrace him," murmured Piédouche. And lifting the little girl in his arms, he laid her on one of the casks. Mademoiselle Lecomte in turn prepared to execute the manœuvre prescribed by the good detective, who stood beside his two *portégeées* encouraging them by word and gesture. The water already reached to his knees, and bounded into the cellar with the impetuosity of a cataract. Piédouche extinguished his candle; he had no need of a light to accomplish the daring plan of rescue which he had just improvised. He depended alone on his strength, his tact, and the protection of God, who never forsakes those who are oppressed.

L.

WHILE Piédouche was thus endeavouring to rescue Thérèse Lecomte, Marthe Cambremer and himself from terrible peril, M. Lecoq was walking round the church at Savigny feeling very worried at not seeing his faithful auxiliary. When he had abruptly separated from him the evening before, to escape from Fouineux, who was dogging them, he had given him an appointment for the next night at the same place and hour. If Piédouche did not come it was because something unforeseen had prevented him, for he was never remiss or tardy. Thus reasoned M. Lecoq, and he was very much troubled at this inexplicable absence, which greatly embarrassed him. Since the gendarmerie had meddled in his affairs, the old man felt that his situation had become a difficult one, and that he could accomplish nothing in the district. His proceedings would be watched, and he could not return to see the Englishman, whose disclosures had been interrupted at the most interesting moment. Piédouche, on the contrary, was suspected by no one; he could come and go at pleasure, and his patron intended to instruct him to pursue the search he had so well begun alone.

Since M. Lecoq had read in a newspaper that his son's appeal had been rejected, he had felt greatly concerned. He was anxious to return at once to Paris, as though his return could change the situation of the condemned man. He had not as yet obtained the proofs of his son's innocence, but it seemed to him that the indications he had gathered would suffice to induce the authorities to grant a temporary reprieve, and he had almost decided to go frankly to his old friend, the chief of the criminal investigation service, and confess everything to him. But he very much disliked leaving Piédouche behind uninformed of his intentions, and did not know how to apprise him of his departure.

The representative of Messrs. Rawson, Jenkins & Co., and the Dauphinois pedlar were supposed to be unacquainted with each other, and if M. Aristide Chalumet went to the Grand Vainqueur to ask for Pierre Paladru,

it would at once arouse the suspicions of the tavern-keeper, and the news of this inexplicable visit would soon be noised throughout the neighbourhood. It was to avoid this serious inconvenience that M. Lecoq had designated a place for a daily meeting, but Piédouche had failed to keep the appointment, and he could not even be sure that he would be there the next night. At last, M. Lecoq determined not to wait for him, but to start for Paris by the first train in the morning, and return in the evening under a new disguise, which would enable them to lodge at the same tavern as the false pedlar. His object was to meet Pigache in Paris during the day, and learn from him if it was thought at the Prefecture that the order for execution would shortly arrive. After waiting about the church till eleven o'clock, he returned to the hotel, settled his account with M. Bonasson, wrote a letter to Pierre Paladru to let him know that he had gone, and left at daylight for Pairs. It must be understood that the letter in question was so worded that Piédouche alone could understand its meaning or recognise its author. On reaching Paris, M. Lecoq left his luggage at the station, and went at once on foot to the Rue de la Huchette, where Pigache lodged in an unpretentious house. Fortunately, the detective was not on duty that day, and M. Lecoq found him in bed.

The interview was short and to the point. "I heard that the petition was rejected yesterday," said the old man. "I have come to find out what is being done. What do they say at the 'establishment'?"

"It would be foolish for me to hide the truth from you, governor," replied number 33. "They think that there will be no abatement of the sentence. M. Louis refused to sign the petition for pardon presented to him by his counsel."

"I expected that. But the day hasn't yet been fixed, I suppose?"

"You know very well, governor, that we are only notified the evening before. To-morrow there will be nothing. They haven't had time to send the papers back. The day after to-morrow, that's Sunday—nothing either. They hardly ever execute on Monday. Drunken men are about all night; there would be too much of a crowd at La Roquette. But, for instance, it might very well take place on Tuesday."

"On Tuesday," repeated M. Lecoq, bitterly, raising both hands to his brow, for it seemed to him as though his head would burst. But this access of despair was of short duration. The old man drove back his emotion, and said, in a firm voice: "Pigache, I need your services all day."

"I am at your orders, governor. What is to be done?"

"In the first place, you will go to your cousin, the livery-stable keeper. He has my trunks and my Indian costume at his house. He must harness at once, and come for me with his carriage to the Boulevard Menilmontant. I am going back to the Grand Hotel, and I must appear to have come from the Saint Lazare station. The trunk on the outside, the costume inside. I will change my disguise on the way."

"Understood, governor. In an hour the trap and the coachman will be before the wall of Père Lachaise."

"That is not all. As soon as you have attended to that, you will start for Savigny-sur-Orge by the train which leaves at a quarter past ten. You will go to the Grand Vainqueur, a tavern just outside the town on the road to Longjumeau. You will ask for Pierre Paladru."

"Good ! Paladru, that's Piédouche."

"Yes. If he is there, you will tell him that I must see him to-day, and you will bring him back with you. It is useless for him to disguise himself

as a negro ; let him come as a tidy citizen, that'll do. If Piédouche isn't at the Grand Vainqueur, you must ask the way to the mill on the Yvette, and you will go and look for him there. If the millers tell you that they have not seen him, then they have killed him."

" Bah ! " exclaimed Pigache, opening his eyes.

" If they have killed him, I will have them guillotined with Tolbiac," replied the old man coldly. " In that case, you wouldn't find him, and if no one can give you any news of him, you will return to Paris this evening. That is everything, and I depend on you."

" Depend on me, governor," said No. 33, springing out of bed. " My cousin lives close by. The carriage will be at the boulevard before you. And I sha'n't fool away my time in looking for Piédouche. Ah ! they want to cut his whistle, do they, the scamps who work for Tolbiac. We'll just see a little—"

But M. Lecoq was already on the stairs. He followed the quays as far as the Pont d'Austerlitz, which he quickly crossed to reach the boulevard where he was to meet the carriage. His costume as a commercial traveller was such as not to attract attention in the streets, and Aristide Chalunet would not have dreamed of becoming the Nabob of Bahour again, if he had not hoped that Tolbiac would fall in with a plan he had conceived and which could only be carried out at the Grand Hotel. Everything happened as he wished. The coachman was at his post at the appointed time, and after a forty minutes' journey Lord Djafer, more of an Indian than ever, entered his handsome apartment at the "Grand." He announced on arriving that his attendant, having fallen ill at Havre, would only return by a later train, and that until Ali's arrival he would deign to be satisfied with the ordinary service of the hotel. The nabob seemed to have been very much pleased with his excursion, and greatly disposed to receive visitors, for he gave orders to admit any one who asked to see him. He had given this order so that Piédouche might be admitted into his presence if, as he hoped, Pigache brought him back during the day. But it was not Piédouche who was the first to arrive. Towards noon a servant came to inform his excellency that a gentleman solicited the favour of an interview, and on the card presented to him M. Lecoq read the name of Holtz. He trembled with joy, for he had not hoped that his desires would be so quickly realised, and he hastened to receive the man whom he so bitterly hated. The agent came in, still deformed, still with crooked legs, still with false hair and green spectacles. Tolbiac had surpassed himself, and his disguise left nothing to be desired. By his air of freedom, and superlative assurance, it could be seen that he had achieved a grand success.

" Well, monsieur," said the nabob to him, " have you finally succeeded ? "

" Beyond all expectation, prince," replied the so-called agent. " I have found Major O'Sullivan's heir."

" God be praised ! I shall then be able to pay a debt of gratitude. The heir, you say. So there exists, then, only one member of the O'Sullivan family ? "

" I have every reason to believe so, although I am not yet absolutely sure of it. The fact, however, will be easily verified, for I possess an authentic list of the descendants of Maurice O'Sullivan, the major's father. One of the descendants is living, I have proof of it. Are the others dead ? That will be easily verified, for I know their names."

" And who is this relative of my father's dearest friend ? What is his name ? " asked the nabob, with an emotion which was not feigned like the interest he pretended to take in the last scion of the O'Sullivan race.

LI.

"PEOPLE often look afar for what they have under their hand," said the false M. Holtz. "The major's heir lives at a few leagues from Paris, near the pretty village called Savigny-sur-Orge—one of the nearest stations on the Orleans line."

"I was not mistaken, then," thought M. Lecoq, with rapture.

"His name is George Atkins," continued Tolbiac. "He is English, and thirty-eight years of age. He is the only son of Sophia Nesley, who was the grand-daughter, by her mother, of Anna O'Sullivan, sister of James Patrick, the deceased millionaire."

"Then he is the major's great-grand-nephew. Perhaps some nearer relatives are living. I almost hope it, for it would especially gratify me to enrich him if he has no right to the inheritance. What is his present position?"

"It is very commonplace. His mother married an actor from love. She followed, in that respect, the example of her grand-aunt, the youngest of the major's sisters, who also married an actor. George Atkins came to reside in France, and in the country from motives of economy. His parents left him only a small capital, on which he has to rely for his subsistence."

"Have you informed him of his new fortune?"

"Not yet. I wished, in the first place, to assure myself that he was the sole heir, and that your generous intentions were unchanged. I was afraid of causing him a false joy."

"I understand that; but there is no reason now to delay telling him that he is immensely rich, and that I adopt him."

"That is what I propose to do this very evening; and, if your excellency will allow me, I will introduce George Atkins to you to-morrow."

"I shall be delighted to receive him, and to give you a reward, the amount of which you will fix yourself, dear sir. I cannot be sufficiently grateful to you, and my admiration is unbounded at the promptness of your success."

"Everything is not yet done," said M. Holtz, assuming a very modest air. "I possess all the proofs of the lineage of George Atkins, but, as I have already had the honour of telling your excellency, I still lack the certificates of the death of the major's other collateral heirs."

"But you hope to be able to procure them?"

"Oh! very readily. Of James Patrick's other three sisters, two married Frenchmen, of whom I have already found traces. In twenty-four hours from now, I shall know if these two branches are extinct. The youngest sister had but one daughter, who died last winter."

"Then, to-morrow I shall know if I ought to transfer to George Atkins all the affection I owe to the O'Sullivans. You will, no doubt, return to-day to Savigny-sur-Orge?"

"Yes, prince; I shall return there this evening."

This question, and this answer, were heard by a visitor whom a servant had just brought in, in accordance with the nabob's instructions, but whom he did not think his duty to announce on account of his apparently low position. This visitor was Piédoch, whom M. Lecoq had certainly not expected so soon, and who was dressed as a citizen of moderate means. The nabob wondered how he could have already received and carried out

the instructions which Pigache was to take to the Grand-Vainqueur, or to the mill on the Yvette. But this was not the moment for questioning him. M. Holtz had not yet taken his leave, although he was evidently preparing for a retreat. Piédouche had recognised him, and knew that the false agent's spectacles and wig hid Tolbiac's execrated face. He also seemed to hesitate as to how he ought to act in regard to this personage. He looked at him askance, instead of giving a fictitious name, and an excuse for his visit.

M. Lecoq spoke for him : " You have come to render me an account of the alms I charged you with," he said to him, with a glance which was understood. " Till to-morrow, sir," he continued, turning towards the agent, " I shall await you impatiently, for I depend on your bringing George Atkins to see me."

" To-morrow, at the same hour, I shall have the honour to present him to you," said the spurious M. Holtz, who rose, bowed to the floor, and went out.

He had barely crossed the threshold when Piédouche commenced a pantomime, the meaning of which could not be doubted. His gestures evidently meant : " Don't let him go."

By a look, however, M. Lecoq kept him silent, and when the sound of a closing door apprised him that the agent was no longer in the apartment, he exclaimed : " The time has not yet arrived. To-morrow that wretch and his accomplice will be caught in the trap that I have set for them."

" He won't come," retorted Piédouche, " you don't know what took place last night: you don't know that he attempted to drown Mademoiselle Lecomte, Cambremer's little girl, and myself into the bargain—and that he didn't succeed, for here I am."

" What is that you say ? Explain yourself. I don't understand."

" I tell you, governor, that I went to the mill yesterday, and the miller's wife agreed to give me some supper and a bed. But it was a job to kill and rob me. She drugged my wine, and while I was half-stupefied, she touched a spring and I fell into the cellar. It is a miracle that I did not break my neck. And do you know whom I found there ? The switchman's daughter. She had been there since they carried her off. They fed her on bread and water while waiting to despatch her."

" Why did they wait ? "

" To kill two birds with one stone. Yesterday evening, Tolbiac carried Mademoiselle Lecomte off from Boulogne, and at midnight his people threw her into the cellar, where I already was. The plan was a very simple one. I know it, because I had heard the miller and his wife, who are bandits, offsprings of the *chaufleur* gang, talking together. It was agreed that when the two girls were drowned, they were to take their bodies and lay them on the railway line, to have them run over by a locomotive."

" Drowned ! How drowned ? "

" The cellar in which they were placed with me has a vent-hole opening on to the race of the mill. The millers had shut the lower sluices and opened those above. You see the effect from here. In less than three-quarters of an hour the inundation was complete. But I found some empty casks, which helped the young lady and the child to sustain themselves on the water. It was hard to get out, though, for the casks would not pass through the vent-hole, and I was obliged to swim for three. But we got through all the same. Ah ! they are courageous, those two youngsters. Not a cry—not a murmur. It would have been a pity not to have saved them."

" And you have brought them to Paris ? " asked M. Lecoq, much affected.

"Not straight. They couldn't stand it. And then, there was no train. I took them to a farmhouse where I had stopped in the morning, and where I knew there were some good people. They did not ask us many questions, but they gave the girls a bed. They dried themselves, and had a rest, and at ten o'clock we went to Epinay and took the train. I have just taken the little one to Cambremer's house, and the young lady to her mother's at Boulogne. Ah ! governor, you should have seen their joy !"

"And you reproach me for having let Tolbiac go !" exclaimed M. Lecoq. "But we have him, since we have the proof of all his crimes. He wished to kill Thérèse and Marthe, just as he killed Mary Fassitt, so as to secure the major's inheritance for this Atkins, who has promised to share it with him. To-morrow they will come here, and give themselves up, both of them."

"But no, they won't come. But do you know what the brigands of the mill are doing at this moment ? They are dragging their cellar, which is full of water, to fish out the corpses of the victims that Tolbiac was to have carried away to-night to lay on the rails. Tolbiac will learn from them this evening that the bodies cannot be found. He will understand that the two girls have escaped, that they will denounce the millers, that the millers will denounce him, and that his game is up for the inheritance. He will clear out without waiting for anything more if he isn't collared to-day."

"That's true," answered M. Lecoq ; "and if he takes flight, I can no longer furnish proof of Louis's innocence. And Pigache has just told me that the order of execution will be given within three days. If I don't hurry, it will be too late."

"Shall I go back to Savigny, and tell my story to the mayor, who will send to the gendarmerie ?"

"No ; that would be useless. It is of less importance to me to arrest Tolbiac than to save my son. We must act here in Paris. Listen, Piédouche, there is only one man who can come to my help, and that is my old friend, the chief of the investigation service. I will go and see him at his office, and take you with me, for I need your testimony. Come, don't let us lose a minute."

LII.

ALTHOUGH his employer's decision had greatly surprised him, Piédouche did not allow himself to make any comments. He realised that the situation was a serious one, and that it was not the time to deliberate. Far from tiring M. Lecoq with idle objections, he did not even ask him if he thought of presenting himself at the chief's office dressed as a nabob. He went out without a word, and awaited his governor on the boulevard. Three minutes later, Lord Djafer appeared on the sidewalk, to the great astonishment of the people of the hotel, who had seldom seen him go out alone, and especially on foot. However, he deliberately crossed the street, followed at a short distance by Piédouche, and entered a passing cab with him. When they were both seated, Piédouche, by his master's orders, directed the coachman to drive to the Quai Conti.

"You are not afraid, then, that they will bother you ?" asked Piédouche, timidly. "They will know this evening at the Prefecture that you have been to your house, and—"

"That matters little. I am burning my ships. Besides, they wouldn't have the heart to arrest a father who is trying to defend his son."

Piérouche was not quite sure that the governor was right in depending on the benevolence of his former colleagues, but, not to discourage him, he kept silent. At the Quai Conti it was an event to see an Indian nabob, with a long white beard, asking for his key of his concierge, who, at first, refused to recognise her former tenant, M. Lecoq. She gave in, however, when he had removed his beard and turban ; and although she thought him crazy on seeing him present himself in such a guise, she welcomed him with exclamations of joy and any number of questions, which he cut short by running up to his apartment. At the end of a quarter of an hour he came down, dressed as had been his wont in days gone by, and took his seat again by the side of Piérouche, who had remained in the cab. At the Prefecture it was very different. When the officers who happened to be in the passage leading to the office of the investigation service recognised Father Lecoq and their former comrade, Piérouche, they drew back with astonishment. They all knew that search was being made for the worthy old man and his faithful auxiliary, and that it was their duty to arrest them, still, not one dared to do so, for Lecoq was loved and esteemed by all the officials. Besides, they saw that he had come to give himself up, and they allowed him to ascend the staircase he knew so well, with Piérouche following his steps. In the anteroom, the three clerks rose up, and when Father Lecoq told one of them to announce him, he was immediately obeyed. They all guessed that a denouement was about to take place, and that they would not have to reproach themselves for having admitted the father of the condemned man without orders.

" You here ! " exclaimed the chief of the criminal investigation service, on seeing his old friend.

" Yes, I, " said Lecoq, taking a seat. " And I bring Piérouche back with me."

" You know that you are both being sought for ? "

" I know it. You will arrest me, if you like, when you have heard me."

" What have you to say to me ? "

" I bring you the proof of my son's innocence."

The functionary could not restrain a movement which M. Lecoq thought he understood the meaning of.

" I come very late, do I not ? " he said, quickly. " Ah ! I have, nevertheless, lost no time, I swear to you. For four months I have been seeking the assassin, the wretch who has had Louis condemned, and I should have discovered him sooner if I had not had to deal with a man of infernal ability, a man who—"

" Name him at once."

" It is Tolbiac."

The chief of the criminal investigation service smiled sadly, and said, half sorrowfully, " I had a presentiment that, sooner or later, you would try to turn suspicion on an officer whom you believe you have a grievance against. Oh ! I excuse you. You are the father, and everything is allowed to a father who is trying to save his son. I will not even order your arrest, nor that of Piérouche ; I will not even ask you what you have done during your absence, for I know."

" You know ? "

" Perfectly. We have not ceased to have an eye on the Nabob of Bahour, and if we have tolerated his actions, it was out of consideration for the former services of M. Lecoq."

" I thank you, " murmured M. Lecoq, touched by the discreet kindness

of the chief. "And in your turn you will thank me when I shall have told you—"

"That you ingratiated yourself into the society of Tolbiac, who has the fault of frequenting some feminine irregulars, that Piédouche watched, and caused Tolbiac's mistress to be watched by the coal-vendors of the Rue de l'Arbalète. I am ignorant of nothing of all that; I am not even ignorant of the fact that our number 33 has more than once been wanting in his duty in favouring your endeavours."

"And you did not warn Tolbiac?" asked M. Lecoq, anxiously.

"No. Do you still think I am hostile to you?"

"You are the most generous of friends," exclaimed the old man, affected even to tears.

"I am only just. I sympathized with your sorrow, I interested myself in your efforts, and I obtained from my superiors authority not to interfere with you. I deeply regret that you have not been successful; I regret it all the more because you can now do nothing more."

"I can do everything. I will prove to you that Tolbiac murdered the Englishwoman, and tell you why he killed her."

"Speak!" said the chief with the air of resignation customary to a man who considers himself obliged to listen to a justification, although he has already formed his opinion.

"I will be brief. You know that Tolbiac is charged with finding the heirs to an enormous inheritance."

"The O'Sullivan estate. He has never tried to hide it. He even told me quite recently that he was on the track of one of the heirs."

"He found him long ago, and that heir is his partner, his accomplice perhaps. The relatives of Major O'Sullivan were four in number. Tolbiac's friend is the most distant of the four, and could only inherit providing the other three were dead. Thus on the 13th of January last Tolbiac commenced by killing Mary Fassitt, who was the nearest of kin."

"What! the Englishwoman of the Rue de l'Arbalète was an O'Sullivan?"

"She was the daughter of the youngest of the major's sisters. And do you know who comes next to her among the heirs to this enormous fortune? It is Mademoiselle Lecomte, to whom my son was to be married. And after Mademoiselle Lecomte comes the daughter of a switchman of the Orleans railway company."

"A child who recently disappeared."

"Yes. It was Tolbiac who had her carried away just as he had Mademoiselle Lecomte abducted yesterday, and if he did not drown them both, it is owing to Piédouche's miraculous intervention. And if they were dead George Atkins, great-grand-nephew of Patrick O'Sullivan, would inherit the ten millions, and divide them with Tolbiac—George Atkins, a drunkard, a ferocious brute. Do you realize now that I really have some proofs?"

"It is a romance you are relating to me," said the chief of the criminal investigation service, shaking his head.

"A romance! Send to Boulogne for Mademoiselle Lecomte, and to the Boulevard de l'Hôpital for Marthe Cambremer, they will testify before you and before the investigating magistrate. Piédouche will also give his evidence. Send to Savigny-sur-Orge a warrant for the arrest of George Atkins, who lives at the confluence of the Orge and the Yvette; and for that of Tolbiac and his mistress, Arabella Disney, whom I suspect of having been Mary Fassitt's servant."

"And if I dared, monsieur," said ex-number 29, timidly, "I would ask you at the same time to lay hands on the miller and his wife at the mill on the Yvette—the villains who tried to kill the two poor girls—and myself at the same time."

The chief of the criminal investigation service was in no hurry to reply. He reflected, and was visibly impressed.

"My dear Lecoq," he said finally, "I don't suppose that you try to deceive me, but the facts you relate to me are so extraordinary that I hesitate about referring them to the public prosecution office."

"I only ask six hours and four of your officers to deliver you Tolbiac and his accomplices. You will confront them this evening with their victims, and to-morrow—"

"To-morrow!" repeated the chief in a strange tone, "that will be very late. Listen to me, Lecoq: I will take immediate steps, and all that mortal can attempt I will attempt; but while waiting till we obtain a result, there is one thing I wish to do for you. Are you anxious to see your son?"

"Am I anxious? Oh! let me go to Savigny, and as soon as I have returned, as soon as you have questioned the villain I will bring you, we will go to La Roquette together. Then we can tell Louis that his reprieve is certain, that—"

"Let us rather go to La Roquette at once," said the chief, rising.

LIII.

M. LECOQ was in a hurry to go to Savigny to arrest Tolbiac and his band, but he was still more desirous of embracing his son. So he did not refuse the offer of his generous friend. This offer seemed to him to augur well, and it did not occur to him to ask himself why the chief was so anxious that this interview, which he took upon himself to authorize, should take place that very day. He said to himself that the bandits of the Château de Séquigny and those of the mill on the Yvette could not escape him, as they would not have time for flight; Pigache had already started as a scout, and before night the officers would surround their haunts, including the house of George Atkins. The chief of the criminal investigation service seemed inclined to place some of his men at the disposal of M. Lecoq, and the old detective expected to conduct them to Savigny and direct them himself. A cab conveyed Louis's father and the chief to La Roquette, Piédouche being invited to occupy the front seat, for his former superior wished to have him on hand. During the journey, the chief asked for additional explanations as to what had taken place at the mill, and ex-number 29 furnished them with alacrity. He knew more about the matter than Lecoq, and, besides, the latter was overcome with joy at the thought of seeing his son, and talked but little. He remembered, however, that he carried in his pocket the document which indicated the relationship of the major's several collateral heirs, and he handed it to his friend the chief, who examined it attentively, but abstained from expressing aloud the reflections inspired by its perusal. He contented himself with nodding his head, and preserved during the rest of the journey an attitude of restraint which gave Piédouche, who for the time being was much more self-possessed than M. Lecoq, and could better understand the condition of affairs, a great deal to think about.

On reaching the prison, the doors were thrown wide open before the chief. There were some warders there who had formerly known Father Lecoq, and who turned away their eyes on seeing him pass along. Pié-douche, it may be mentioned, remained in the cab by the orders of his employer. The cells in which prisoners condemned to death spend their last hours, open into an interior court far removed from the place where the scaffold is erected. While passing along the corridor conducting to them, the chief said to Father Lecoq in an undertone : "I take it upon myself to leave you alone with your son, because I am quite sure that you will not bring blame upon me for doing so."

"I thank you, my friend," replied the old man, in a firm voice, "but I wish you to be present at our interview, and to listen to our conversation. That is as much as to say that I am quite sure of Louis's innocence."

The chief, somewhat surprised, did not insist, but made a gesture of acquiescence.

A turnkey opened the door of the cell, a kind of stone cage, cold, bare, lighted by a casement window, and furnished with a bed and a stool. Louis Lecoq was lying upon his bed reading. He wore the horrible strait-jacket, but the keeper who watched him unbuckled it during the day, so that he could use his arms. The old man entered first, and hastened to his son. Then followed for a few moments an exchange of caresses and broken sentences.

"I have come to save you," exclaimed M. Lecoq. "This evening your innocence will be proved, and to-morrow—"

"I am not innocent," said the condemned man in a husky voice.

"What do you say, unfortunate child ! You don't understand, then, that I have discovered the murderer of Mary Fassitt. The wretch is a man who has done everything in his power to effect your destruction—it is Tolbiac."

"Tolbiac?" replied Louis, passing his hands across his forehead. It was plain enough that this name recalled to his remembrance recollections long effaced from his memory.

"Yes ; he calls himself Tolbiac," resumed M. Lecoq, "but he must be English—or at least he has lived in England, and there he knew that woman."

"I too, I knew her," murmured Thérèse's lover.

The chief of the criminal investigation service, who had stood aside, approached the bed on hearing these words.

"Monsieur," said the condemned man to him, "I should not have requested you to come to receive my declaration, which cannot at all change my fate. I am resigned to die, and had resolved to keep silence, but since I am indebted to you for the opportunity of embracing my father, I wish you to know everything."

"Pardon me !" he added, looking at the old man, who could scarcely support himself. "Death will be less cruel to me, and, perhaps, you will blush less for your son when I have told you the truth."

"My God !" thought the father, "can I be mistaken ?"

"I have lied too long," continued Louis, in a firm voice. "I will lie no more. It was I who went to the Rue de l'Arbalète on the night following that of the crime. The portrait found on me she gave me. When I was surprised in the boudoir, where I sought her, I was still ignorant of her death—"

"Ah ! it was not you then who killed her !"

"I loved her no longer, but I had loved her," continued the condemned man, without replying to the exclamation of M. Lecoq. "I had met her in London when I was at a boarding-school at Clapham. Her mother was an actress, and intended her for the stage. Her father, who had been an actor, was dead, and in the same poor house where she lived there was a man who wished to marry her in spite of herself. We adored each other, and we had sworn to fly together. That game of patience—those cards which were found in my rooms, were a souvenir of our last interview. To the judges I talked of a young girl at Heidelberg; I lied. However, I had to leave England. You took me to Germany. I was then nothing but a child. I forgot, while Mary still remembered; and six months ago, when a pure love had been born within me, when I was already engaged to an adorable young girl, chance brought us face to face with each other in the Champs-Elysées. I ought to have fled from her; but I had not the courage to repel her when she begged me not to abandon her altogether. I did not hide from her that I loved another—but she only asked me to protect her. Since I had left England, the unfortunate girl had been seduced by the man who pursued her in former years. She was an orphan without resources, and she had succumbed. And yet although she submitted to this wretch, she still refused to marry him. He caused her too much fear."

"I know now why he killed her," exclaimed M. Lecoq.

"I had the weakness to consent to go and see her," continued Louis, "and I saw only too clearly to what a depth of degradation she had fallen. Her persecutor had hired a house for her in a deserted neighbourhood, and tolerated, perhaps even favoured, the life she led. She admitted to me that she lived on the liberality of a profligate merchant."

"Who paid dearly for his frolic," murmured the chief of the criminal investigation service.

"I had met this man two or three times in the yard in front of the cottage, and it seems I had excited his jealousy. Mary still loved me. The coldness I showed towards her only stimulated her passion. Degraded, dishonoured, she still clung to the hope of winning me back, and yet I swear that I never encouraged her. I went to see her in response to the desperate appeals she sent to me. She wrote me that her tyrant, the man who had persecuted her from her childhood, overwhelmed her with threats, since he despaired of compelling her to marry him, and declaring that he would end by killing her, she begged of me to defend her. I went and found her engaged at the game of patience, which reminded her of our *amours* of other days. It seemed to her that by occupying herself with what was a chaste souvenir, she raised herself from the degradation into which she had fallen. She obliged me one day to accept her portrait—the one which was found in my pocket-book—and she had herself portrayed holding a queen of spades in her hand, the fatal card, as she pretended, which had announced to her in days gone by that we should be separated forever."

"And this man knew that she received you, did he not?" asked M. Lecoq.

"He knew it. The waiting-maid, who was entirely devoted to him, had told him of it. Only he did not know who I was, and had never seen me in the house. But Mary told me that he reproached her severely for seeing me."

"Everything explains itself then," said the old man. "He surprised her playing at patience, and in killing her he fastened the card which he considered to be an allusion to his rival on her heart."

"That is too romantic to be probable," coldly said the chief of the investigating service, who had listened with a good deal of attention, but who did not seem to be convinced. One might have divined from his physiognomy that he asked himself if this long narrative were not a fictitious story improvised by the condemned man.

"For it was he who murdered her, was it not?" continued M. Lecoq.

"He killed her because she refused to follow him to England, where he wished to take her. She was to have started the next day, and he had forced her to make preparations for her journey. By his orders the servant had already left the house. He came, she resisted him, defied him, insulted him, perhaps, and then he struck her."

"You hear!" exclaimed the father.

"It is a pity," said the chief of the investigation service, "it is a great pity that you did not relate all that to the jury. You would have touched them. The Englishwoman no doubt told you the name of the man whom she called her persecutor?"

"Yes, sir. His name was Harry Dermott."

"Dermott!" exclaimed the chief and Father Lecoq at the same time, but in very different tones.

"I see, sir," continued the condemned man, "that you suspect me of trying to obtain my pardon. You are mistaken. I have killed; I ought to die."

LIV.

"You have killed!" exclaimed M. Lecoq, who was greatly astounded.

"I killed Monsieur Lheureux," replied the condemned man, without hesitation.

"Take care," said the chief of the investigation service, lowering his voice. "That is an admission, and, although I did not come here to provoke it, it is my duty to take note of it."

"I killed him. My condemnation is just," continued Louis, firmly.

"Ah! it was then true," murmured the old man, hiding his face in his hands.

"Will you explain to me what took place?" asked the chief, in a much less frigid tone.

Evidently the frankness of this confession had made an impression on him, and his feelings were already less hostile.

"On the evening of the 13th of January," said Louis Lecoq, "I had dined at Madame Lecomte's at Boulogne. I had received a letter in the morning from Mary, begging me to go and see her that day. The letter was so pressing that I did not think I could refuse to go to the Rue de l'Arbaète. Unfortunately, I did not arrive there till ten o'clock, and Mary had expected me much earlier. I found the gate and the door of the house both open. Through the window-blinds I could see that a light was burning in one of the rooms of the ground-floor; it was the dining-room. Mary was in the habit of dining very late, so I supposed she was still at table. I entered and found myself face to face with a man whom I recognised. It was the protector whom I had already met sometimes as I was leaving the cottage. He was eating alone. Why was not Mary seated beside him? I never knew. Perhaps she had quarrelled with this old man who was dreadfully jealous; perhaps she feared that I might surprise them. Of one thing only I am sure, that he was somewhat intoxic-

cated. He rose up like a madman as soon as he saw me. I wished to retreat, but he barred my way. He insulted me—and caught hold of me by the throat. I pushed him off, a struggle followed, he drew back as far as the door of the pantry, clinging to my clothes. I was stronger than he, and was about to rid myself of him when, all at once, he struck me in the face. Then I was no longer master of myself. I had my cane in one hand—and I struck him a blow—only one. He fell and dragged me with him in his fall. I tried to raise him, but I saw that he was dead. Then I lost my head and fled."

"Without seeing the woman who had been the cause of this terrible misfortune?" asked the chief of the criminal investigation service, quickly.

"I wish to God that I had thought of looking for her," replied Louis sadly. "I should have saved her life. But I was crazy—I fled into the street and continued running along without looking behind me."

"I passed a horrible night. And the next day, when I had to go to my father's and listen to the projects he made for my happiness, and dine with him at Madame Lecomte's, I suffered tortures compared to which those of death on the scaffold are nothing. I was without information. The newspapers had as yet said nothing of the crime of the Rue de l'Arbalète. But I thought of the terrible situation in which Mary was placed. I did not know that she had been killed. That merchant's corpse was always before my eyes, and I said to myself that it would be cowardly on my part if I did not go to the help of the unfortunate woman who would perhaps be falsely accused. It was already enough to be a murderer. I should not have dared to have entered that accursed house in broad daylight, but when I found myself alone, at home, after leaving my father and the young girl I loved, I gathered up my courage and went to the Rue de l'Arbalète. I took with me a detective's card, a card which bore the name of Lecoq. I had said to myself that it might prove useful. Indeed, I already resorted to the tricks of a professional assassin. I entered the cottage. The darkness made me bold. I entered, but I did not dare go into the dining-room. I opened the door of the drawing-room. I found it empty, and then I called Mary— You know the rest."

"Ah!" exclaimed M. Lecoq, taking his son in his arms, "why did you hide the truth?—no jury would have had the heart to condemn you."

"The truth," murmured Louis; "I have had it on my lips ten times. At the trial, when the presiding judge adjured me for the last time not to be my own destroyer, I was touched—I was about to speak; but Thérèse was there—it would have been necessary to confess before her that I had loved an unworthy woman, and that I still went to see that woman. If I had said—and nevertheless it was true—if I had said that everything had long since been ended between her and me, Thérèse would have thought that I lied. I preferred to die."

"Poor child!" sobbed the old man. "Ah, you deceived yourself, she would have forgiven you—and she will forgive you—she knows everything now. They wished to kill her as well."

"They wished to kill her!" exclaimed Louis.

"Yes," continued the father. "I will tell you later on, all that has happened—when that wretch Tolbiac has been arrested—and he will be, thanks to the generous friend who has allowed me to see you, and to whom I shall owe your salvation—"

"Don't thank me," said the chief of the criminal investigation service, quickly, "I have only done my duty. But time is precious. Your state-

ments must be verified—and at once.” And addressing Louis’s father, he added : “Come, my dear Lecoq.”

The old detective had enough strength of character to obey the necessity which obliged him to curtail his paternal effusions, and a mind sufficiently intelligent to understand that his son would not be saved as long as Tolbiac was not captured. When the two friends found themselves on the gloomy esplanade which extends in front of the prison, Louis’s father asked in a voice full of emotion : “Well! do you still doubt his innocence ?”

“I believe that he did not murder the Englishwoman,” said the chief, evasively.

“And it was for the murder of the Englishwoman that he was condemned. The manslaughter he was guilty of would, under the circumstances, have been punished by a few months’ imprisonment. Louis received provocation. He killed without intending to inflict death.”

“He affirms it, and I am convinced that he does not lie. But I must have indisputable evidence to enable me to lead those who alone have the power of preventing justice from taking its course, to share this conviction with me.”

“I asked you for some officers to arrest Tolbiac. I know where to find him. I will conduct them myself. You can summon Mademoiselle Lecomte and Cambremer and his daughter before the public prosecutor. Piédouche is there already to testify. When you hold Tolbiac and his mistress, the investigation will soon be at an end.”

“And you think that that will suffice? You think that by proving that the people of the mill on the Yvette tried to kill a pedlar, a young girl and a child, you will establish the fact of your son’s innocence? You forget that these people will defend themselves, that Tolbiac will deny everything, that you and Piédouche are suspected, and that magistrates are not satisfied with romantic stories. You forget, especially, my friend, that you will lack time.”

“Time! I need only a few days to demonstrate by evidence the guilt of that villain.”

“I will help you with all my might, for your son has just convinced me that you are not mistaken. He said that Mary Fassitt’s persecutor was named Dermott, and we know at the Prefecture that Dermott is Tolbiac’s real name.”

“What more do you need?”

“I should need a week, and we have but fifteen hours before us.”

“Fifteen hours!”

“My dear Lecoq, you are a man, and it is best to tell you things as they are. I have been warned that the execution will take place to-morrow.”

“To-morrow! it’s impossible. The appeal was only rejected yesterday!” murmured the poor father, who staggered like a drunken man.

“The rejection of the petition was decided in advance. The crime has made too much of a stir. The condemned man holds too high a position socially for indulgence to be shown him. It is desired that the affair should be quickly terminated.”

“And you will allow this murder to be committed—you, my old comrade, who know the truth !”

“Listen to me, Lecoq,” said the chief, who was greatly moved. “I swear to you that if it lay with me, the execution would be countermanded this instant ; but you know the official formalities, you know how difficult

it is to get an order revoked, when it has been regularly issued. However, I will occupy myself with the matter at once. I will hasten to the office of the public prosecutor, and even to the Minister of Justice. I will repeat what I have just heard, and I will insist with all my power to have a reprieve granted."

"This evening you shall have the real culprit—"

"I hope so, and I will help you to arrest him. We will go to the Prefecture. I will give you my best officers, and you will take Piédouche with you. Try and catch Tolbiac, and, above all, try to find the mute, for Tolbiac will deny everything, while if the mute recognizes him and does not know your son, the reprieve will not be refused. It is the mute we want."

"I will have him," said M. Lecoq, straightening himself up by a supreme effort. "Let us go."

"May you speedily succeed. For your son the minutes are hours, and the hours days. I will plead his cause here while you work for him at Savigny. I will wait for you in my office all night—that is to say till the moment I shall be obliged to come to La Roquette, a little before dawn—and in this season the day dawns early."

"God will not allow it to dawn on the execution of an innocent man."

LV.

THE visit to the prison had occupied considerable time, and it was four o'clock when M. Lecoq took the train in company with Piédouche and six of the best officers of the Prefecture. They were all supplied with regular commissions and letters which authorized them to requisition the help of the public force in case of need. Louis's father was naturally the commander of this expedition, with full power to act as he thought best. He was calm in appearance, but, nevertheless, he was heart-sick, for so little time remained to him to save his son that he almost despaired of success. And he did not beguile himself with illusions as to the chances of success which would follow the efforts made by the chief of the criminal investigation service. He knew that Louis was caught in the gear of that judicial mechanism which only stops when it has crushed the condemned man, and he was equally aware that the scaffold is not erected merely to be taken down. The time has gone by when a man on horseback sometimes broke through the crowd, showing a letter from the king granting pardon, when the executioner, ready to strike, lowered his axe; when the victim raised his head from the block amid the acclamations of the people. Now everything is regulated, even unto clemency. It is no longer the custom for it to manifest itself at the moment when the unfortunate man, whom others have declared guilty, considers he can depend only on the mercy of God. M. Lecoq also understood that Tolbiac's capture would not suffice to prove his son's innocence, and that the mute's testimony would alone be efficacious. Where could he find this mute whom the assassin had spirited away? In the first campaign, neither Piédouche nor his employer had discovered anything to put them on the track, and it was greatly to be dreaded that Tolbiac had rid himself of the poor fellow by one of those violent measures which were familiar to him. Lecoq trembled with the fear that he had had him assassinated by the brigands of the mill on the Yvette, though on the other hand, he hoped that the villain had contented himself with imprisoning him in the château near the forest of Séquigny.

This château no doubt served as a residence for Tolbiac and his accomplice, Arabella Disney. Neither Lecoq nor Piédouche had had time to go there, and it was probably not very easy to gain an entrance to it. However, this time, they were prepared to open every door.

Louis's father had formed a plan, which consisted in falling, in the first place, upon the mill, in searching it from roof to cellar, and in arresting all who were found there; next, in repairing to the house of George Atkins, who would not attempt to escape, as he was always intoxicated after twelve o'clock; and, finally, in surrounding the château with the two towers, and entering it by leave or by force. All this could be done very quickly, and from the indications furnished by these several operations, they would start on the search for the deaf-mute. M. Lecoq also decided on leaving the train at Epinay-sur-Orge. He did not care to show himself at Savigny, although nothing in his costume or in his person bore trace of Aristide Chalumet. But Fouineux might happen to cross his path, and Fouineux annoyed him. The programme was carried out, item by item. The confluent of the two rivers is at almost the same distance from the two villages; a trifle nearer to Epinay. They soon entered the wild looking valley, at the end of which the two streams unite, and at once took up a position to prevent Tolbiac's accomplices from escaping. Two officers were posted at the end of the stone bridge, two at the foot-bridge, while the other two followed their chief. Lecoq and Piédouche then entered the mill, the door of which was open, as usual. These false millers having neither wheat nor bran, nor flour, did not fear being robbed. Piédouche recognised the place where he had laid on his bed of empty sacks. He found the entrance to the room behind the partition, where the Chauffailles had received Tolbiac, and again saw the traps which gave access to the cellars; but all the brigands had decamped. Escorting his employer, he thoroughly searched this strange habitation, which had certainly not been constructed for the accommodation of honest people. It was composed principally of lofts and cellars; ladders took the place of staircases, and, by way of windows, there was but one, a dormer-window, at the top of the roof. No one was found in the little room behind the partition, nor in the garret, nor in the wine-cellar, Jacquot's habitual abode. The other cellar, the one in which Tolbiac's victims had been confined the evening before, was full, to the level of the vent-hole, of black, stagnant water. The lower sluices had been opened, and the race was dry, but the cellar could not empty itself.

"That's the way of it," said Piédouche, on showing his employer this gloomy cistern. "I can see what took place as well as though I had been there. Tolbiac went to Paris this morning to chat with the Nabob of Bahour, and, on leaving, he left orders with the millers to fish out the bodies, which were to have been taken away to-night and thrown on the railway-line. As proof that they have dragged the bottom of the cellar, here is a grappling-iron attached to a cord. On returning, Tolbiac no doubt heard that his accomplices had found no bodies, and easily understood that we had escaped. He suspected that we should go and file a complaint at once. So he left; and Chauffailles and Jacquot did the same, and they will never again set foot in this barracks, where they failed in their plans."

"I think as you do, that it is useless to wait for them here," said M. Lecoq. "If they have not yet left the neighbourhood, they are at the château."

And he thereupon left the mill, leaving an officer on guard in the lower room, in case—as was quite improbable, however—that the millers should come back.

He then went with Piédouche towards the residence of George Atkins. The officers whom he had put on guard round this dilapidated villa, informed him that they had seen no one go in or come out. The windows were open, but no sound betokened that the house was inhabited. M. Lecoq went in, already convinced that the occupants had evacuated it, but to his great surprise he saw the red-headed servant stretched out on the floor, snoring like a hog, in front of an immense fire beside which stood a kettle containing a smoking alcoholic mixture of some kind or other. On the first floor, George Atkins was lying, dead drunk, in the midst of a forest of empty bottles. The master and servant were evidently no longer in a condition to run away, and it sufficed to leave a man in observation before the lair of these wild beasts. Having taken his precautions in that direction, M. Lecoq assembled the rest of his brigade and led them straight to the château seen on the hill. From a distance, this residence had quite an attractive appearance, with its two pointed towers. But viewed more closely it was but a flimsy erection surrounded with high walls and stunted trees, and, despite their feudal appearance, the two towers proved to be nothing but dove-cots. The forest commenced a hundred paces from the wall, and the nearest houses were a thousand yards distant from this make-believe château.

"If Tolbiac has chosen a residence in this neighbourhood," said M. Lecoq to himself, "it is evidently here that he would be found." And he was about to ring at the gate when he perceived that it was ajar. He pushed it open, and saw that the porter's lodge was empty. Thereupon he entered, and, at the end of a small yard, where the grass was growing between the paving-stones, he found the door of the house which was also open. Piédouche accompanied him. The officers were divided. One of them watched the entrance; the others, at convenient distances, the surrounding wall. It was, unfortunately, a useless precaution, for M. Lecoq soon realised that the house was abandoned. He found nothing in it but traces of a recent and precipitate departure; open trunks and articles of clothing belonging to both sexes were scattered here and there, together with loose papers.

"Here are some trunks which resemble those seized at the cottage in the Rue de l'Arbalète," grumbled Piédouche.

"And here is an envelope addressed to Harry Dermott at the Château de Séguigny," exclaimed Father Lecoq. "Dermott, that is Tolbiac."

"Then we have found the nest, but the birds have flown."

"They cannot be far off. Tolbiac has barely had time to return from Paris and see the brigands at the mill."

That's true. But he may have taken a train to Orleans, and the devil only knows where he is now. It would be as well perhaps to telegraph along all the lines."

"No," said the old man, in a broken voice, "it would be useless; it is seven o'clock, and to-morrow at daylight—it is the mute I want. Has Tolbiac taken him away?—and if he has left him, how are we to find him?"

The unfortunate father sank into an arm-chair, took his head between his hands, and remained plunged in reflections which Piédouche dared not disturb. All at once however, M. Lecoq started up. "Go," he said to his faithful auxiliary, "go to the chief of the criminal investigation service, tell him what you have seen. Tell him I have proofs against Tolbiac; show him this address, talk to him about the villain's flight and the disappearance of the millers; lie, if it is necessary: swear to him that I am on the

track of the mute, and beg of him to obtain a reprieve for only twenty-four hours. I have an idea—an inspiration from God!—if they allow me a day and a night, I am sure of saving my son!"

Piédouche thought that M. Lecoq was becoming insane, but that was not the time for remarks, so he replied: "I'm off, and rest easy, sir. If I don't obtain the reprieve, it won't be my fault. It is very late to countermand the order for an execution; but, all the same, when they know what I'm going to tell them, they'll be utterly heartless to refuse."

His governor let him go without saying a word more. He knew that he could rely on his intelligence and devotion. M. Lecoq did not tarry at the château. An idea had occurred to him, and he wished to act on it without losing a minute. He called one of the officers, and with his assistance finished inspecting the house so recently evacuated by Tolbiac. This inspection gave him the certitude that that wretch and his accomplice had sojourned there. It would have been useless to wait for them, and yet M. Lecoq left one of his men there, and ordered the other three to follow him. The old man took the road leading to Morsang, the nearest village. He walked along very rapidly, gesticulating and talking to himself, to the great astonishment of his soldiers, who began to wonder, like Piédouche, if their general had not lost his mind. It was quite another matter when, some three hundred paces from the château, they saw M. Lecoq stop abruptly, look attentively towards the river, and, suddenly springing from the road, descend towards the meadow with fast strides. They followed him, to satisfy their consciences, and soon discovered that he was hurrying to overtake a priest, who was walking along the bank of the river, reading his breviary.

M. Lecoq came up with this priest just as he was about to cross the bridge, and stopped him with these words: "In the name of Heaven, Monsieur le Curé, tell me if it was not you I saw yesterday entering that cabin over there with a boy, whom you awaited at the river bank?"

"It was indeed I, monsieur," replied the priest, greatly surprised at the words addressed to him. "May I ask—"

"My son's life depends upon the answer you are about to give me. Who is that young man?"

"A poor deaf-mute, whom I have undertaken to teach, and who comes every day to take lessons of me in writing."

M. Lecoq almost fainted with joy, and had scarcely the requisite strength to articulate these words: "He lives in that château, does he not, which is close to the forest?"

"He did live there. The foreigners who rented it for the season went away to-day."

"And—did they take him with them?" asked the old man, in great distress.

"No, monsieur. They have gone to Paris, I think, and he is to join them again this evening. Do you come on their behalf?"

"No, no. He is to join them again, did you say?"

"He told me this morning that his master had ordered him to go to the house of one of their compatriots at dusk—in fact, to that house you see close to the mill. They are English people."

"And he also is English, no doubt."

"The poor child knows nothing himself. He was brought to France last year by a Monsieur Dermott—the tenant of the château—and he remembers very little about his childhood. He must have been abandoned by his

parents, and the Englishman, his master, can tell him nothing of his past life, for four months ago the lad did not know either how to read, write, or even to speak by signs."

"And thanks to you, Monsieur le Curé," asked the father of the condemned man, "he knows all that now?"

"Yes, he has made astonishing progress—all the more astonishing as he has been obliged to hide himself in order to learn. Imagine to yourself, monsieur, that his master insisted on his being left in complete ignorance. Everybody cannot talk the language of mutes. But I speak it from taste and from duty. I studied the method of l'Abbé de l'Epée, and can talk with these unfortunate beings as easily as though I were a professor of the Institute in the Faubourg Saint Jacques. This Englishman, on the contrary, seemed to make it a point to prevent his *protégé* from ameliorating his infirmity by this admirable art, invented by a philanthropist to lend speech to those whom God had deprived of it."

"Then how did he give him the order to come this evening to Atkins's?"

"In fact, the foreigner who lives opposite the mill is named Atkins. You know that?"

"And a great deal more besides."

"Oh, the appointment was a very simple matter. M. Dermott showed him M. Atkins's house from up there, and raised nine fingers. The mute understood, without the least trouble, that he was ordered to be there at nine o'clock. But excuse me, monsieur, if in my turn I question you. Why do you ask me for this information?"

"Why?" exclaimed M. Lecoq. "Because the salvation of a man who is innocent, and who has nevertheless been condemned to death, is in question. It cannot be, Monsieur le Curé, that you have not heard of the affair of the Rue de l'Arbalète in Paris?"

"I receive no newspapers," said the priest; "and yet last winter I certainly read the account of an abominable crime there."

"And you were not struck by one strange circumstance—the co-operation of a mute who disappeared a few days after having been arrested?"

"Excuse me—I was astonished, like every one else, at that incident; and I will confess to you that I had doubts as to the guilt of the unfortunate young man who was accused."

"That young man is my son!"

"Your son!"

"Yes, and you can save his life, and what is worth more than life, his honour."

"I!"

"You, Monsieur le Curé, you alone. I have come here impelled by paternal love and sustained by a conviction. The murderer is that Englishman at the château—I will explain everything later on—when I have finished with the executioner—the executioner who is waiting. My son will be executed to-morrow morning if I don't deliver the guilty party tonight. The guilty man is named Tolbiac—I mean Dermott. Excuse me, I lose my head. But the mute who carried the body in a trunk is the very mute you have been teaching."

"You remind me that at the time the crime was committed, in the month of January, M. Dermott had already rented the château; he seldom visited it, but he kept the mute there. The other Englishman, Atkins, arrived here suddenly some time before. Shortly after New-year's-day, the mute was no longer to be seen. I then knew him only by sight. After

being absent for about a fortnight, he returned. It was then that I gained his confidence and commenced to teach him to read and write—”

“ And you never asked him what happened to him in Paris ? ”

“ Excuse me ; only he was not able to explain to me clearly what he had done. I understood that he had been put in prison, and that he had afterwards been released, his master having claimed him.”

“ God be praised ! Louis will not die on the scaffold,” murmured M. Lecoq. And returning at once to this rapid investigation, on the success of which his son’s salvation depended, he hastily asked : “ You are sure that the mute will come here this evening ? ”

“ I am sure of it,” replied the priest. “ His respect for his master almost amounts to superstition.”

“ Say, rather, that he fears him.”

“ That’s possible. This man Dermott is an imperious, harsh man, who inspires everybody with a certain terror. The poor boy has always obeyed him without a word. And thus, a few hours ago, he came running to that shepherd’s hut, where we have met every day, and bade me good-bye while weeping. He told me that his master was going to take him back to England—that he started in fact to-night.”

“ And where is he now ? ”

“ In the forest, where he passes half his time musing. Not being able to communicate his thoughts to men, he talks to the birds—and to the trees. I might look for him, but I should not find him. But at eight o’clock precisely he will be here—and I came to wait for him, for I wish to embrace him before he goes.”

“ At eight o’clock,” muttered the old man, who thought of the guillotine which the executioner’s assistant would commence to erect at midnight on the Place de la Roquette.

“ Oh, he will be punctual ; I have given him a silver watch.”

This conversation, which was to decide the fate of the condemned man, took place at the end of the stone bridge, and the day was waning rapidly. The mill on the Yvette had already almost disappeared behind the mist which was slowly rising from the bottom of the damp valley where the two rivers meet. Brightly illuminated by the light of the fire, the windows of Atkins’s house alone glowed through the fog.

“ Which way will he come ? ” asked M. Lecoq.

“ By the meadow and the bridge,” replied the priest, without hesitation. “ That is the most direct road from the forest.”

At this moment the old detective saw one of his officers coming towards him, the one he had left on guard near the house occupied by Atkins. The others, those who had followed him from the château, kept at a respectful distance, so as not to disturb his conversation with the priest.

M. Lecoq took a few steps forward.

“ Governor,” said the sentinel to him, “ three men and two women have just entered the Englishman’s house ! ”

“ Three men and two women,” replied M. Lecoq. “ Describe them.”

“ There is one gentleman and a lady,” replied the officer. “ The others look to me as though they might be the miller, his woman, and the youth who worked for them.”

“ They didn’t see you when they entered ? ”

“ No fear, governor. I was lying flat on my belly in a cabbage-patch. A fellow knows his business.”

"And your comrade?"

"He is hidden inside the mill, behind the mill-stones. Oh, the mouse-trap is well set."

"That's all right. Go and post yourself again on guard, and whistle if you see any one show his nose outside the Englishman's barracks."

The officer turned on his heel and disappeared in the fog. M. Lecoq then quickly returned to the priest, who witnessed all these goings-on with evident astonishment. "Monsieur le Curé," he said to him, in a voice full of emotion, "I ask you to restore me my son."

"I!" stammered the good priest; "but I can do nothing."

"You can do everything—and I wish you to know everything. I am seeking the assassin of the woman who was killed in the Rue de l'Arbalète. These men who accompany me are detectives." The priest gave a start. It was evidently repugnant to him to co-operate with the police. "I beg of you, listen to me to the end," continued M. Lecoq. "It is a father who is talking to you. My son is about to perish unjustly. For four months I have been working to save him. My prayer has been heard, help has been extended to me, and God has allowed me to find the real culprit. If I had not met you, I should have lost hope, for to-morrow morning the head of the condemned man will fall."

"To-morrow morning!"

"Yes, and in order to obtain a reprieve I must deliver all these scoundrels to justice this very night—the Englishman and the people of the mill. Especially must I take the mute with me. The assassins will be caught, for they are there—in that house which is under guard—and the mute will come to see you. You will help me to question him?"

"Oh, willingly."

"I am obliged to ask still more of you. My testimony will be suspected. The testimony of the mute will be insufficient. They will not challenge yours. You are a priest, you know the country perfectly."

"For twenty years I have been priest of the parish of Morsang."

"You know the wretch Dermott, his worthy companion, his accomplice, Atkins, and his hired bandits, the millers—you will know how to make the mute talk. You will attest that I am not playing a farce—the authorities will believe you, if only out of respect for your sacred office. I ask you to accompany me."

"To Paris?" exclaimed the priest in dismay.

"Yes, to Paris—this evening—as soon as I have the mute."

"But think, monsieur, that for several years I have not lost sight of the steeple of Morsang—that my parishioners will need me."

"The innocent man who is about to die also needs you. You will not refuse me—you cannot refuse me."

"But—the last train leaves Savigny at ten minutes past nine—and I should, at least, like to return to Morsang to warn my curate that I shall be absent."

"I will take charge of that. One of my officers will go and tell him as soon as we have finished here. We will go and wait for the mute on the bridge. As soon as he appears, you will explain to him what is required of him. I will order my men to arrest all who are found in the Englishman's house. Thirty minutes later, we shall be at Savigny; by midnight we shall be in the office of the chief of the criminal investigation service—by midnight it will still be time."

"Advance, you others," called M. Lecoq, addressing the men who had

stood discreetly aside. "The game is in cover," he said to them. "Number 66 has just seen them enter the house, and he is on guard to prevent them from coming out. There are seven of them, five men and two women; one of the women is equal to a man; but there are three of you, and your two comrades will help you. Besides, the Englishman and his servant are dead drunk. Tolbiac and the miller will probably defend themselves. But bullets and knives cause you no fear. They must be taken alive, and the affair must be done quickly. Go."

The gallant fellows marched away without saying a word, with that cool courage which is more rare than the bravery of the battle-field. Each of them knew that he was about to risk his life without hope of reward or glory, but merely as an act of duty, and yet not one of these obscure heroes held back.

"I will join you presently," added the old detective, simply.

The squad had gone but about twenty paces from the bridge, when the priest said, in a low tone: "Here comes the mute."

M. Lecoq turned quickly, and saw a human form moving in the mist which hung over the meadow. The poor youth, whom Tolbiac had compromised, seemed to hesitate about coming forward. However, the priest went to him, took him by the hand, and brought him to the bridge. The old man trembled as he found himself face to face with the lad who held his son's life in his hands. He would have liked to have questioned him, without waiting a minute, but it was dark, and the means has not yet been discovered of chatting with a mute in the dark.

"Let us go to the mill," he said to the priest. "I have some matches and a piece of candle with me. While the officers capture all those scoundrels, I will question this good fellow with your assistance."

The good priest had assumed his part in the adventure and resigned himself to being led wherever the distressed father chose to lead him. He took the mute by the arm and walked behind M. Lecoq. The windows on the ground floor of Atkins's house glowed in the darkness, and it seemed as though the light from the fire which illuminated them had become much brighter. All at once, a great jet of flame burst through one of these windows and rose towards the sky, illuminating with sinister brilliancy the building which, for a few minutes, already, had sheltered Mary Fassitt's assassin.

"Fire!" exclaimed M. Lecoq. "That wretched drunkard has set fire to his den. Tolbiac will escape us—let us run—I must prevent him from getting away—" And he started forward, followed by the priest, who had no need to resort to force to take his scholar with him. The fire had, in a few moments, made terrible progress. This rotten old building ignited like a pile of shavings. The fire having started in the lower room, where the red-headed servant had kept up a fire for the purpose of heating his master's grog, the flames were already lapping the floor above, and rushed furiously up the dilapidated stairway.

"Governor," said one of the detectives, "we shall have no one to take back with us this evening. The house has only one outlet, and that is stopped up by the flames. Unless they determine to jump from the windows, they will all be broiled like sausages."

"They must be saved at all hazards," exclaimed M. Lecoq.

Terrible shrieks arose in reply to his words; the women, in trying to get downstairs, had encountered a wall of fire. The windows of the room in which Atkins was lying insensible opened violently, and at one of them ap-

peared the miller and Jacquot, while at the other stood Tolbiac. By the light of the fire, the villains perceived the officers posted in the garden, and Tolbiac uttered a cry of rage.

"Jump!" cried M. Lecoq to him, in a loud voice. "My men will receive you in their arms."

"Ah! ah! it is you then, you old blackguard!" vociferated Mary Fassitt's murderer. "My account is settled, but your son will be guillotined to-morrow morning, and you will die before he does."

A shot from a revolver followed this horrible speech, and a ball grazed M. Lecoq's shoulder.

"Take care of yourself, governor," said one of his subordinates, quickly. "If you get killed here, it won't help your son's affair."

These words forcibly reminded Louis's father that his son's hours were numbered. He sheltered himself behind a pear-tree and took out his watch. "Half-past eight," he exclaimed. "Come, Monsieur le Curé, we have scarcely time to reach Savigny to catch the train. Come, I beg of you, in the name of one who is about to die unjustly."

The priest asked no better than to go, for the terrible spectacle he had witnessed made him sick at heart; nevertheless, it troubled him greatly to depart without asking divine mercy for the unfortunate beings who were already being devoured by the flames, and M. Lecoq was troubled how to get him away, when, just as one of the officers had fallen from a second bullet, the first floor of the house fell in with a terrible crash, and disappeared amid a vortex of fire and smoke.

"Courage, my boys," cried M. Lecoq; "try to get them out alive. As for myself, I must go and save my son."

This time the priest did not resist. The mute also allowed himself to be led away, and seemed but little moved by what he had seen. M. Lecoq panted with impatience and hope. At last he had the living proof of his son's innocence. One hour more and he would enter the office of his friend the chief with the mute in his company. So Louis would be saved.

But, alas! the unfortunate father had fate against him. When the three pedestrians reached the station, fairly out of breath, they found that they were five minutes too late for the train.

LVI.

THE prison clock had just struck the hour of midnight. The night was gloomy, the heavens black, and on the open square where criminals are decapitated, human forms were moving about in the darkness around some lanterns placed on the pavement. The police had already closed the streets which opened on to the Place de la Roquette, and night-prowlers were beginning to assemble behind the guardians of peace. The precautions taken had apprized them that preparations were being made for an execution, and that at sunrise a murderer would die. And what a murderer! The assassin of the Rue de l'Arbalète, the famous Lecoc, whose recent trial had stirred all Paris; the young and the handsome lover of a young girl of the upper classes, a rich man, a *monsieur!* This was a spectacle which the amateurs of executions had not often an opportunity of beholding. There were some who had already come the night before, a few hours after the rejection of the appeal. They had hoped that they would not be kept waiting long, and their instinct had served them well. They knew, however,

that they could not get near the scaffold ; that they would see nothing unless it might be the foliage of the trees, and, perhaps, the blade suspended between the two uprights of the guillotine. But it is something to be present, even at a distance, during the dying agonies of a felon ; to divine by the movement produced among the privileged ones, that the victim is approaching, and to hear that low murmur which follows the fall of the axe. Other seekers of unhealthy emotion were ambitious to be better situated. In the restaurants, merry young swells and laughing "irregulars" hastened to empty their glasses to arrive in time. They were anxious not to miss the *fête*, and threw themselves into cabs which drove at once towards the theatre of blood where the performances commence at daybreak. These hoped to find windows to be hired, but the windows which command a view of the Place are few in number and none of them are let out.

In the meanwhile, a little group of favoured ones : journalists, literary men in quest of sensations ; curious grandes from the clubs ; eccentric foreigners and the friends and *protégés* of the Prefecture of police, crowded on the sinister pavement over which the condemned men take their last steps. They spoke in low tones as people speak near a death-bed, and watched with gloomy curiosity the movements of some workmen who were strangely occupied. These men drew sundry pieces of wood, baskets and boxes from a large covered van. They had already set up a quadrangular platform on a couple of crosspieces, and on this narrow platform they were now occupied in erecting, parallel to each other, two posts painted a dark-red. One man held a lantern, the light from which he threw on the joints of this strange scaffolding. Others adjusted the mortices, inserted the screws, and fastened the bolts. All this was done silently and rapidly. One scarcely heard, from time to time, the blow of a hammer given very cautiously. Very soon the wooden edifice assumed a hideous aspect. The uprights, held in place at the top by a transverse beam, had the look of a gibbet. Then, when they were perfectly perpendicular, and the man who directed the work had examined the brass groves sunk into their surface on the inside, one of his auxiliaries, suitably dressed, opened a flat box whence he drew a triangular blade, having a wide and heavy plate of lead for its handle, and fitted it between the two posts. It was the knife. The workmen attached a cord to it, hoisted it, and lowered it several times to assure themselves that it worked easily, and finally raised it to the top and left it suspended by a spring. Then to the base of the supports they fitted two movable boards cut in the centre in such a way as to form two half-moons destined to come together ; next a sort of narrow long shelf was fixed in front, with an upright lever, held in position by a couple of hooks. Then the men brought a long wicker basket, placed it to the right of the lever, and raised its lid. Under the shelf, they next slid a red leather receptacle, lined inside with tin, and into which they poured a little bran. All was ready. The culprit could come.

Perfected, debarred of steps and balustrade, reduced to its simplest expression, the guillotine looked as though it wished to hide itself. Except for the tall, red arms and the triangle of steel, it looked somewhat like a sewing-machine. And the executioner looked like an ordinary citizen, his assistants resembled honest workmen, while the vehicle which awaited the body of the victim might have been taken for a provision dealer's van. The apparatus formerly used for executions has been done away with ; a man is guillotined less theatrically, and also with less horror. The group of spectators had been increased by the arrival of tardy people who had come

during the preparations. The police officers already formed a line on each side of the walk which leads from the large gate of La Roquette to the threshold of eternity. The mounted gendarmes had just arrived and taken up their position in the street.

Piédouche and Pigache stood and chatted apart, leaning against the green painted van which was to carry the bleeding remains of Louis Lecoq to the cemetery of the condemned. Pigache had made a useless and even an unlucky journey to Savigny-sur-Orge. Incompletely informed, and reduced merely to the resources of his own intelligence, which was but moderate, he had only done so much harm, for his appearance in the neighbourhood had determined the Chauffaillés to decamp. Jacquot, who was prowling about the mill, had scented a spy, and warned the brigands he served.

At Atkins's place, and at the Château de Séquigny, Pigache had done more mischief, and so, despairing of success, he had returned to the Prefecture where he had been careful not to brag of his expedition. He was still ignorant of the fact that for several hours his chief favoured the supreme efforts of a father in distress.

Piédouche, on his part, had followed to the letter the instructions which he had received from M. Lecoq. On arriving he had gone at once to the investigation offices and had related to the authorities the first incidents of the expedition, informing the chief that the old man was making great efforts to complete the proofs already gathered before night, and begging that a reprieve might be granted for twenty-four hours. He had been listened to with attention and interest, but had obtained no positive assurance, and in the evening, while chatting with his comrades, he had learned that the order of execution had not been revoked. Then, discouraged, broken-hearted, dismayed, the poor fellow had gone with Pigache to wait for M. Lecoq at the Orleans terminus. But the last train arrived, and M. Lecoq was not there. Piédouche next hastened to La Roquette, taking Pigache with him, and determined to station himself near the path which would be followed by the condemned man, and to throw him a friendly word at the risk of being forever driven from the police. He had been waiting for three hours, sick at heart, watching the preparations for the execution in anguish, and counting the passing minutes. The guillotine was erected, an officer had just let the knife down and raised it again to assure himself that the horrible machine worked properly. The sky already began to lighten. Dawn was about to appear.

"Nothing," muttered Piédouche; "they cannot have discovered anything, and in forty minutes it will all be over."

"Who knows," said Pigache, to console his friend. "The chief does not come, and he ought to be here before now. It is a good sign. As long as we don't see him, and the chaplain doesn't enter the prison, there is still hope."

"Hope!" said Piédouche, bitterly. "Look! the executioner is taking out his watch; he gives an order to his son-in-law; he speaks to the commissary—"

"He tells him that the chief is late. I repeat to you, it's a good sign."

"The chief! why, there he is; I see him over there—I know him by his figure; he is walking along close by the wall of the prison; he is going in, and the priest is with him—it is all over. Father Lecoq has a son no longer."

"How is it that he comes from that direction?" grumbled Pigache.

"And ther that priest who follows him, that isn't the chaplain. The Abbé Crozes always comes in a cab, and his cab isn't there. Who are those three men who are with them?"

"The governor of the prison or the examining magistrate—perhaps he has come to ask the poor boy if he has no declaration to make."

"I see plainly one white cravat, but I see only one."

"They are going in—they are in—"

It was true. A group of people, conducted by the chief of the criminal investigation service, had just entered the prison. The executioner once more looked at his watch, made a sign to his assistants, and then went with them towards the great door which would soon be thrown wide open to let the condemned man pass out with his funeral *cortege*.

LVII.

ON that day, at a very early hour, some extraordinary, unheard-of news spread through Paris. For the first time since the beginning of the century, the scaffold had been taken down without having accomplished the sanguinary task for which it had been erected. The crowd which awaited the coming of the condemned man had been dispersed by the police at the very hour at which the execution was to have taken place, and it was said that a reprieve had been granted to Louis Lecoq. And on the morrow it was learned that God had not allowed the head of an innocent man to fall. The details of this prodigious and exciting story became known: the death of the real murderer, swallowed up in the smoking ruins of Atkins's house; the providential discovery of the mute; and the heroic efforts of the father who had done so much to save his son. And the public began to pity the victim of a calamitous chain of circumstances, to be astonished that the magistrates and jurors had thus allowed themselves to be deceived, as though the most upright and intelligent men were not subject to error. The dreadful sacrifice had very nearly approached completion.

The chief of the criminal investigation service had done everything in his power to have it postponed for one day, for he was inclined to believe that his old friend and his son had told the truth when they affirmed—the one that Tolbiac was Mary Fassitt's assassin, and the other that he had involuntarily killed M. Lheureux. But, for want of power to produce other proofs than interested affirmations, the chief had only obtained peremptory refusals. The affair had made too much noise. Louis Lecoq was not an ordinary man, and social interests required that the punishment should be exemplary and immediate. Rebuffed everywhere, under pretext that not a single witness had been produced to show that the evidence was of serious importance, the worthy chief had fallen back upon the hope that Father Lecoq would bring back the mute in the evening, and so he had established himself permanently in his office, to be ready till the very last moment to receive them. Meanwhile, the old detective had passed through some terrible catastrophes. He had reached the station, with the priest and the mute, just too late for the train, and that train was the last one. The express trains do not stop at small stations. So he had to run to Savigny, and search through that sleeping town for a horse, a vehicle, and a driver. The trap belonging to the Grand Cerf was in use, and fifty minutes were lost in waking up the other tavern-keepers. Finally, at half-past ten, the trio were on their way to Paris, and at a quarter to one the

horse was stopped on the Quai de l'Horloge at the entrance to the Prefecture.

With the chief of the criminal investigation service the explanations were short and decisive. The account of Tolbiac's death, and the incidents which had preceded it, the written declaration of the mute who now knew very well how to trace on paper a summary of facts, the attestation of the priest, whose character placed him above suspicion, amply sufficed to convince him of the truth. But it was necessary that this conviction should be shared by those who alone had the power to suspend the execution of a given order, and it was past one o'clock in the morning. Alone, Father Lecoq could never have accomplished such a feat, and it required all the devotion, all the activity, and all the perseverance of the generous chief to prevent the commission of a legal crime at dawn that morning on the Place de la Roquette. He succeeded, and a little before daybreak, when Louis Lecoq seemingly had but a few minutes longer to live, his four defenders entered the prison with a magistrate, specially delegated by the minister of justice, with full power to grant a reprieve, if, in his judgment, the circumstances warranted it. The cause was gained, and after twenty minutes of confrontations and questioning, the order reached the executioner to take down the scaffold. From that moment, the life of the condemned man was saved, for a man, even if guilty, is never subjected twice to the horrible anguish of the preliminaries of an execution.

The inquiry, however, was a long one, and before making public reparation for a deplorable error, the authorities were determined to be completely enlightened. A commutation, a full pardon, would not have restored his honour to Louis Lecoq. What he wanted was an act of rehabilitation granted by the President of the Republic, based on the recommendation of the Cour de Cassation, and nothing is more rare or more difficult to obtain. If the real culprit had been living, he might have been condemned, and have thus annulled the sentence rendered against Lecoq. But Tolbiac, or rather Dermott, had perished, and with him all those who had been connected, even accidentally, with the crime of the Rue de l'Arbalète. So it was necessary, then, for the truth to be brought to light by formal testimony, which very fortunately was not wanting. The lives of the victim and the assassin were traced back, and the ties which had united them were plainly shown, as well as the connection between Tolbiac and Mary Fassitt's servant, afterwards Arabella Disney. It was proved that he had an interest in doing away with the heiress, who refused to marry him, and with the other grand-nieces of Major O'Sullivan ; that he had entered into an agreement with Atkins to secure him the inheritance, and divide it with him ; finally, that the brigands of the mill on the Yvette were hired by him, and that he had occupied the Château de Séquigny. And to conclusively prove the innocence of Louis Lecoq, the mute gave by signs, and in writing, an account of his journey to Paris on the night of the 13th of January.

He stated that Tolbiac had taken him to the cottage secretly, and had shut him up in the cellar, only releasing him at two o'clock in the morning to put the trunk on his back. The carriage which had waited on the Boulevard d'Italie for the assassin and the corpse, which had subsequently served to carry away the mute, and, still later, to abduct Marthe Cambremer and Thérèse Lecomte was found at the château, with two fine horses. It was driven sometimes by Jacquot and sometimes by the abominable Chauffaille, the former having barely escaped being killed by the blow which

the switchman had given him on the head on a certain evening at Boulogne. What more could be asked for by conscientious magistrates?

Three months after that night, which had so nearly been his last, Louis Lecoq left prison with his head erect. His prolonged captivity had not been too hard for him. His father came to see him every day, and if Mademoiselle Lecomte did not accompany the old man in his visits, it was because, having been a witness in the affair, the judicial authorities had forbidden her entering the condemned man's cell. But M. Lecoq was not forbidden to tell Louis that Thérèse still loved him, and that she had pardoned him a fault so cruelly expiated. Madame Lecomte had also forgiven him, although at first it seemed rather hard on her to have to be gracious to a man who had subjected her Thérèse to so trying an ordeal. The noble young girl inherited the millions left by the major. This was an additional reason why she should remain faithful to her engagement, but it was also a reason why Louis Lecoq should release her from her promise, for he was proud and poor, since his father had spent the greater part of his fortune in playing the part of a nabob. Is it necessary to add that Mademoiselle Lecomte refused to take her promise back, and that her lover was too much in love to remain inflexible. They were married at the latter part of the summer, in the old church at Boulogne, and started at once for Italy, where Madame Lecomte soon afterwards joined them.

M. Lecoq gave them his blessing, but he did not follow them. He went back to his apartment on the Quai Conti, and resumed his former habits. The second-hand book-dealers on the quay and the sparrows of the Tuileries celebrated his return, like that of an old friend who is seen again after a long absence. However, he was not without occupation. The young couple had begged of him, on parting, to find them a fine estate in the country. He found it, and it was then necessary to have the château prepared to receive his dear children. He installed Piédouche there as steward. The "young 'uns" were sent to school, and will receive good dowries, but the poachers will have to behave themselves, for ex-number 29 has not forgotten his old business. Pigache was not willing to leave Paris, but remained in the detective service. He will, however, certainly never know want, for Louis Lecoq has assured him a good income. There are none, even to the Gaioupiats, who have not been overwhelmed with benefits. The worthy coal-dealers have sold out, and gone back to Auvergne, where they are constantly adding bits of property to Aunt Couvignon's bequest. Cambremer is no longer a switchman. Marthe has received the title to an income of fifty thousand francs from her cousin, and on the return of the happy couple, she and her father will go and stay with them. This return is somewhat delayed. Thérèse and Louis spent the winter at Sorrento, and the summer on the banks of Lake Como. They have already a daughter who resembles them both, and their happiness is unclouded. And thus, their exciting history closes like a fairy tale.

AN OMNIBUS MYSTERY.

I.

HAS it ever happened to you, at midnight, or thereabout, to miss the last omnibus of the line that runs through your neighbourhood? If you are not under the necessity of regulating your expenses in strict accordance with your income, the mishap merely involves the hiring of a cab. But if, on the contrary, your modest means prohibit this slight extra expenditure, you must return on foot, sometimes splashing through the mud in the midst of a driving rain, and fuming against the Omnibus Company, because, forsooth! after seventeen hours' hard work a brief respite is granted to horses and employés.

There are sundry ways of missing this blissful conveyance, the supreme hope of the belated. When a man has waited at a crossing, and after vainly signalling to the driver, sees the word "Full" appear in white letters on a blue background,* he rages and no wonder. But after all it was not altogether unexpected; so he bears up against his ill luck and continues to walk on, vaguely flattering himself that another bus will soon appear, and sustained by this illusion, he reaches home on foot without any sense of excessive fatigue. The worst mischance is to present oneself at the head of the line at the moment when the final omnibus has just filled. This time there is no mistake; it is the very last, and the passengers who are ahead of you laugh in your face, when you politely ask whether a single tiny seat does not remain. The decree has gone forth and is without appeal. Your feet are your only resource, and they must bear you to your destination, for there is no hope of overtaking on the route this wretched vehicle upon which you had depended to be saved a tedious journey.

So it was when one evening at a quarter past eleven, at the corner of the Boulevard Saint-Germain and the Rue du Cardinal, just as the driver of the green omnibus which runs from the Halle aux Vins to the Place Pigalle was mounting to his seat, a woman arrived, all out of breath—a woman rather stylishly attired and still young, as might be judged from her figure, for a thick veil concealed her features. She came from the direction of the Jardin des Plantes, and was scarcely able to articulate the usual question addressed by late comers to the employé who gives the signal to start.

* It should be remembered that Paris omnibuses are alone in question here. The London General Omnibus Company with all its capital has never adopted the simple, but ingenious, contrivance, by which the Parisians are informed whether an omnibus is full or not. We are supposed to be a practical people; but as for omnibuses, they order these things better in France. —[TRANS.]

"We are full, madame," he said, "and it is the last."

"Ah, dear me!" she muttered; "and I have to go to Montmartre. I shall never get there."

And, in fact, a journey on foot of three or four miles at this hour and season was well calculated to appal a woman. The severe cold was rendered still more biting by a keen north wind. There was snow in the air. The streets were deserted; not a passer-by on the broad sidewalks, and not a cab in sight.

The omnibus was full inside, but no one had ventured to brave the temperature by climbing to the knifeboard, where a very bad cold might be caught for the modest sum of three halfpence. The lady raised her eyes toward these "seats in the air," as drivers call them, and her anxiety to profit by this last opportunity must have been very great, for her gesture clearly indicated a readiness to climb outside, despite the north wind and the frost. But aware that female passengers cannot ride on the knifeboard, she again with a sigh gave a glance into the interior of the vehicle. No doubt she hoped to enlist the sympathy of some gallant gentleman, who would relinquish his seat for her benefit. It was a slender hope, for the occupants were for the most part of the same sex as herself—a sex which does not readily forego a privilege. She had the good fortune, however, to interest some one in her behalf, for a gentleman seated at the further end suddenly rose and approached the door. "Get in, madame," he said, springing lightly to the ground.

"Oh, monsieur, you are too kind. I must not abuse your complaisance," exclaimed the lady.

"Not at all! not at all! I shall get a seat on the top. It isn't warm, but I am thick skinned."

"Really, monsieur, I don't know how to thank you."

"There is no occasion for thanks. It isn't worth the trouble."

"Come, madame, if you please," said the conductor; "we must start."

The lady already had a foot on the first step and did not wait for further urging. But instead of accepting the assistance of the conductor, she placed her hand in that of the gentleman who had relinquished his seat to her, and let it remain there a second or two longer than the occasion required. Still it was the least she could do for so polite a gentleman, and there was nothing compromising in the contact, since they both wore thick-lined gloves. The gentleman who had just yielded his seat was, moreover, neither young nor handsome. His moustache and whiskers cut in military style, were rapidly growing grey. He wore an overcoat which must have been obtained at a cheap tailor's, and a low-crowned hat of hard felt—the hat of an independent man, who does not plume himself upon following the fashions. His features were regular enough, but hard—cut, as it were, with hatchet strokes, and his air was common. He climbed above with remarkable agility, and took his seat near the steps. Whilst he was settling himself there, raising his overcoat collar above his ears, the woman glided into the seat which had been vacated, between a stout woman muffled in a woollen hood and a young girl plainly attired.

Opposite sat a man, the only one in the omnibus: a tall, dark, slim young man, with an animated expression and a true artist's face—the look of an artist who had achieved success, for he had not the disorderly aspect of the daubers who haunt the beer-shops of the outer boulevards. The other passengers belonged to the various categories of omnibus *habitues*—women of the middle classes, returning home after an evening passed with

relatives at the other end of Paris ; mothers with infants in their arms ; and seamstresses falling asleep after a long evening in the workroom.

The tall, dark young man passed his chance companions in review. Only two seemed worthy the trouble of a study, and these two sat precisely opposite him. He had lost nothing of the little scene which preceded the departure, and, we must do him the justice to add, he was on the point of yielding his seat when the man with the round hat rose. He remarked the pressure of hands the couple exchanged—the beginning, perhaps, of an adventure, as he said to himself, resolving to take note of the incidents which might occur during the journey.

The woman who had so quietly accepted a favour from a stranger was evidently not of the same society as her chance cavalier, for her toilet might almost be called elegant. Her figure was pretty, and her eyes shone through the lace veil which screened her face. The attention of the artist was divided between this veiled woman and the young girl at her side. The latter also had dropped the veil attached to her brown velvet bonnet, and little could be seen of her face save the lower portion—a dimpled chin, a mouth, rather large but very pure in outline, and a pale, colourless skin.

"A Spanish complexion," said the young man to himself. "I am sure she is pretty. What a pity the cold prevents me from seeing so much as the tip of her nose. What a mania the women have for masking themselves whenever it is in the least cold. To see a pretty face one must wait for summer time. If there were only a little light in this wretched omnibus ; but one lamp is out and the other burns as if there were no oil in it. One can't see a wink. It is like a rolling cavern. Crimes might be committed and no one be the wiser."

Continuing his observations, the young man noted that the girl was evidently not rich. Although it was the month of January, she wore the kind of short sleeveless cloak called a *visite*, of some black stuff, and so thin and worn that it froze one merely to look at ; her dress was a currant-coloured alpaca, shiny from long use, and her hands were concealed in a worn and scanty muff, which must have been originally bought for a girl of twelve.

"Who is she ? where does she come from ? where is she going ?" the young man asked himself. "And why does her neighbour watch her out of the corner of her eye ? She does not know her, or else she would speak to her."

The omnibus had made considerable progress. It was now passing over the Pont Neuf, and the driver, anxious to bring the journey to an end, whipped his horses into a trot on the slope leading towards the Quai du Louvre. As the horses broke into a faster pace, there was a sudden jerk, which threw the young girl against her neighbour, the last comer, and clinging to her arm, she uttered a feeble cry, followed by a profound sigh.

"Lean on me if you are suffering, mademoiselle," said the veiled woman.

The other made no reply, but leaned still more upon the shoulder of the compassionate person who had so kindly offered her support.

"The girl is ill," exclaimed the young man. "The omnibus must be stopped, and I am going—"

"Why, no, monsieur, she is asleep," said the veiled woman quietly. "She was already asleep, when the jerk aroused her suddenly, but she has gone off again. It would be better not to disturb her."

The young man bowed, while the veiled lady took the bare hands of the

sleeping girl and placed them in the muff, hanging from her neck by a frayed cord.

"A mother could not care more tenderly for an infant," thought the young man. "And I was taking this excellent woman for an adventuress! And why? Simply because she accepted a seat offered her by a gentleman, and thanked him by a pressure of the finger-tips! Well, this gallant sir will only have an inflammation of the lungs for his politeness, for he must be freezing up there. But I should like to catch a glimpse of the sleeping girl's face; the lower lines are perfect. She cannot be rich, judging from her dress, and she might consent to sit for her head. If she goes as far as the Place Pigalle I shall propose to her while she is getting out to give me some sittings. It is to be hoped she will open her eyes before the end of the journey."

The omnibus moved on at a rate to put cabs to the blush. At the Place de la Bourse a change was made. Three women near the door were replaced by a family, consisting of father, mother, and a little boy who fell asleep. The massive vehicle then rolled on again like a vessel rocked by the billows, lulling the passengers to sleep; so that by the time it ascended the Rue des Martyrs, re-enforced by a third horse, the inside resembled a dormitory. The young man alone held himself erect. He was suddenly aroused from his reverie by a noise which proceeded from above: the sound of a boot-heel striking three successive strokes at slight intervals. Then the boots appeared on the steps, the limbs followed, and lastly the man, who, after a hasty glance inside, sprang to the ground, and the artist noticed that he disappeared rapidly along the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne.

"Come," he thought, "this old codger hasn't the intentions I was attributing to him. I fancied he was waiting for the lady to alight, and that as she accepted his seat he would try to induce her to accept his arm as well. Not at all. He is quietly going off alone, and he's right, for she seems in no mood to accept familiarities from a gentleman of his stamp."

Meanwhile the omnibus reached the point where the Rue des Martyrs crosses other well-populated streets—the Rue de Laval to the left and the Rue Condorcet to the right, a stopping-place where passengers descend in a body. They nearly all rose at once, as if each aimed at alighting first, and there only remained the tall young man and the two women seated opposite.

The woman who supported the sleeping girl, made a movement as if to rise also. "Monsieur," she said, "this poor child is so soundly asleep that I should regret to arouse her, but I am compelled to get out; for I live near here, and it is very late. May I venture to ask you to sit beside her?"

"With great pleasure," replied the young man, taking a seat an orange-woman had just vacated.

"Wait a moment, I pray," said the charitable lady to the conductor, who was about to give the signal to start; and she raised the head of the young girl from her shoulder with infinite care and placed it on that of the young man, who was seated ready to receive it.

The sleeper gave no sign of life, and abandoned herself so entirely that the person to whose care she was intrusted found it necessary to support her to prevent her from falling.

"Thanks, monsieur," said the veiled lady. "I should have regretted to leave her alone, but since you go to the end of the line I need not hesitate. If you could accompany her to her door you would do a good act, for at this time of night, the neighbourhood is not safe for a young girl."

And without awaiting a reply she quickly left the omnibus, which proceeded along the Rue de Laval. The conductor was seated by the door, busy verifying the last entries on his way-bill by the fugitive light of the gas-lamps. So the artist remained *tête-à-tête* with the beautiful sleeper, with nothing to hinder his speaking a few soft words or asking her for a sitting; but to accomplish this, he must awaken her, and he desired to use some ceremony. He tried a little discreet pressure, hoping to arouse her from her torpor, but in vain. It then occurred to him that the girl was not sleeping so soundly as she appeared. He was an experienced Parisian, and had little faith in the virtue of damsels who get into an omnibus alone, near midnight, and are bound for the outer boulevards. He leaned over a little, to try to obtain a sight of the obstinate sleeper's face, but the last lantern, which had been in its death-throes from the outset, was now extinct, and the interior of the omnibus was almost completely plunged in darkness. At last he leaned over so far as to touch the young girl's face, and perceived she was as white as alabaster, and that no breath issued from her parted lips. He then took one of her hands, which still remained in her muff, and found that it was icy cold.

"She has fainted," he murmured, "and needs assistance." Thereupon, he called to the conductor.

"Here we are at the station," the latter said. "It's useless to stop so near."

In fact, driven by a coachman eager to retire to rest, and drawn by horses which sniffed the stables, the omnibus had cleared the Rue Frochot in a twinkling and reached the Place Pigalle.

The young man now tried to raise the unfortunate girl, but she fell back again, and then for the first time he discovered that life had departed!

"Here we are, monsieur," said the conductor, who took them for a pair of lovers. "Sorry to disturb your lady, but she must get out, unless she's a mind to sleep here all night."

"She will sleep in the grave," said the young man. "Don't you see that she's dead?"

"Good! That's a fine yarn you are spinning. Never jest with death; it brings bad luck."

"I have no inclination to jest. I tell you this woman is as cold as marble and doesn't breathe. Come, help me to take her out of the omnibus. I can't lift her alone."

"She can't be very heavy; but if she is ill I'll give you a helping hand. She mustn't be left here, that's certain," said the conductor rather surly.

The pair together found no difficulty in raising the girl. The waiting-room was not yet closed; so they carried her there, laid her upon a bench, and the young man, with a trembling hand, raised the veil which concealed half her face. She was marvellously beautiful, with a face like one of Raffaelle's Madonnas. There was no light in her large dark eyes, but they were still open. The contraction of her features expressed unutterable pain. "It is true, she is dead," murmured the conductor.

"During the journey! and you did not discover it!" exclaimed the inspector of the omnibus office.

"No, neither did monsieur, who was seated beside her. She didn't fall, for she was supported—she ceased to breathe, that's all. It's odd, but it's a fact."

"A case of apoplexy, then, or an internal rupture."

"For my part," said the young man, "I believe she was killed."

"Killed!" repeated the conductor. "Now come! there's not a drop of blood about her."

"And," added the inspector, "if any harm had been done her the other passengers would have seen it."

"She is about eighteen," said the young man. "That is not the age of sudden deaths."

"Are you a physician?"

"No, but—"

"Well, then, you know no more about it than we do. And instead of talking, it would be as well to look up the police. We can't keep a dead body here."

"There are two policemen approaching."

In fact, two guardians of the peace, on their beat along the boulevard, were advancing with measured tread. The inspector called to them. They came forward deliberately, ascertained the nature of the case, and had the affair recounted to them by the conductor; whereupon the senior of the two remarked that such catastrophes were not of rare occurrence. "But this gentleman asserts that she was murdered in the omnibus," said the omnibus inspector.

"I assert nothing at all," replied the young man. "I merely affirm that it is a most extraordinary death. I was seated opposite the poor girl, and—"

"Then you will be summoned to-morrow to the office of the commissary of police to state what you know. Give me your name," said one of the policemen.

"Paul Freneuse. I am an artist, and reside in the large house which you see yonder."

"The one occupied by artists. All right; I know it."

"Here is my card."

"That will do, monsieur. The commissary will hear you to-morrow."

The idea of a crime had entered Paul Freneuse's mind, but he could not precisely tell why. The corpse bore no trace of a wound, nor had anything occurred during the ride to warrant such a suspicion. "I have too much imagination by far," he said to himself as he moved away in the direction of his residence; "to be seeing mysteries in an event that is of every-day occurrence. The child had an affection of the heart. It is a pity, for she was very beautiful; but I can do nothing in the matter, and should be a simpleton to waste my time in opening an inquest when I have my picture to finish for the show. It is more than enough that I should have exposed myself to an examination by the commissary of police, whom I have nothing serious to tell, and who would probably laugh at my odd fancies if I spoke of a possible murder—committed by whom, good heavens? By that charitable dame whom I replaced at the corner of the Rue de Laval? And how? By breathing on her young neighbour. It is absurd! life is not extinguished like a wax candle."

The shutters of the omnibus office had already been put up, and the younger of the policemen hastened in quest of some men to bear away the corpse. The other placed himself before the door to keep the inquisitive folks at a distance.

Freneuse had only taken a few steps when he remembered that he had left his cane in the omnibus. It was a pretty rattan, which a friend of his, a naval officer, had brought him from China. The omnibus was still at the same spot, and on getting in to look for his stick he struck a match.

The cane had rolled under the seat, and on stooping to pick it up he perceived a paper which had been dropped as well, and a gilt pin, of the kind used to keep ladies' hats and bonnets in position.

"Ah!" he said, "this was lost by the poor girl. I shall have a memento of her."

He left the omnibus, and was hastening homeward when he descried in a café, between the Rue Pigalle and the Rue Frochot, a comrade and intimate friend, an artist like himself, who was seated before a table in front of an empty glass, and a pile of saucers which marked the number of *books* he had absorbed. This friend was alone in the first compartment of the café, a sort of glass cage, where one is in full view of passers-by. He recognised Freneuse and made telegraphic signals to him, to which Freneuse replied by entering, knowing well enough if he passed on his comrade Binos would pursue him. This beer-bibber was indeed named Binos. He was an indifferent artist, but an incomparable discourser and practical philosopher; at times as indolent as a dormouse or else busied with everything except painting; withal the best fellow in the world, most useful and most amusing. Although Freneuse never agreed with him upon any subject, he could not dispense with his society, and he was wont to consult him for the sake of his contradictions and whimsical paradoxes.

"Here you are!" exclaimed Binos. "I have been looking for you all the evening. Where do you come from?"

"From an out-of-the-way neighbourhood. I dined with a cousin who's a surgeon at the Hôpital de la Pitié and resides in the Rue Léopède."

"And you took the omnibus at the Halle aux Vins instead of returning on foot through this magnificent frost. You will never be anything but a philistine."

"Philistine or not, a strange thing has happened to me."

"In the omnibus? I see how it is. You have lost your correspondence."*

"Don't jest; this is a serious matter. See what is passing yonder."

"I see the conductor holding forth to five or six idlers who have gathered round."

"There is a corpse in the office—a beautiful young girl, who was with me in the omnibus, opposite me at first and beside me afterwards."

"Did she breathe her last in your arms?" asked Binos.

"Very nearly: and no one perceived when she expired. It is so extraordinary, that a little while ago I had almost persuaded myself that the death was not a natural one."

"A mystery to unravel. That's my affair. Tell me the story, and where I know the facts you shall have my opinion."

"The facts! There are none. Everything happened as naturally as possible. When I came from the Boulevard Saint-Germain the young girl was already in the omnibus. She struck me as pretty, and I took the seat opposite. On her right there was a stout woman, and on her left—a gentleman, if you like; he might have been, from his appearance, ex-drummer of the national guard."

"Ah! here we already have a suspicious character."

"Before the omnibus started he gave his seat to a lady who came late—

* A ticket given, by which one may change one's omnibus at one of the various offices *en route*, and proceed by a vehicle of a different line going nearer to one's destination without paying extra fare.—[TRANS.]

a real lady this time, elegantly dressed, and not at all ugly, as well as I could judge through her veil."

"If she didn't raise it, it was because she had a reason for concealing herself. And she accepted the courtesy of the man you have described without hesitation? Do you know what that proves? That they knew each other, and that the thing was arranged beforehand. The man kept the place, the woman took it and dealt the blow."

"But there was no blow," said Freneuse.

"You believe that because you didn't see it. This change of seats wasn't natural. Now I have a basis on which to proceed. Go on. It was the last conveyance, was it not?"

"Yes. I had to run all the way from the Rue Lacépède in order not to miss it."

"And the man climbed up outside? Five degrees below zero and a biting wind. I'm satisfied. He perched himself there so that his accomplice might perform the operation. They alighted together, I suppose?"

"Not at all. The man got out at the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne and the woman a little farther on at the corner of the Rue de Laval."

"That is to say, three minutes after. They had no difficulty in rejoining each other. The man, I am satisfied, stopped a moment on the steps, so that the woman might see that he was going."

"No; but I remarked that, before alighting, he rapped three times with his heels, so distinctly that everyone inside heard it."

"Of course! it was the signal."

"I confess this idea occurred to me."

"Ah! you see you suspected them, only you hadn't courage to say so."

"And you, when you bestride a hobby, you let it carry you much too far. I will admit that there was an understanding between the pair, but not for the purpose of murdering a poor girl who was unknown to them."

"What do you know about it?"

"I know at least that she did not know them, for she did not honour them with a look. The man no doubt hoped that the woman would reward his obligingness by allowing him to accompany her. She suffered him to press her hand on getting in."

"Better and better. I have not the shadow of a doubt. That pressure signified, 'kill her.'"

"You are insane! I have told you that nothing whatever occurred during the ride."

"When was her death first discovered?

"I was the first to perceive it when we reached the station. The veiled lady had sustained the girl from the Pont Neuf, fancying, like myself, that she was asleep. When the lady left the omnibus she asked me to take her place. I readily assented to serve as a pillow for a young and pretty girl. The seat on her right hand was empty; so I took it, and the lady passed over to me a burden which I conceived to be a very pleasant one."

"And you didn't consider this sleep very astonishing? Paul, my boy, you are very expert in painting, but your simplicity passes belief. The lady knew well enough that she was confiding a corpse to you. She judged by your face that you suspected nothing, and left you to find your way out of an embarrassing position as best you could. She might serve you an ugly trick. What did you do on your arrival?"

"Ah! you mean to say that she might accuse me of having murdered the girl?"

"Stranger things have happened."

"Come, now, I have just been talking with the police : there is not the sign of a puncture on the corpse. See ! there are some men coming with a litter to convey her away."

"There is matter in this to furnish the newspapers with copy for three months."

"The newspapers will mention to-morrow that a young girl died suddenly in an omnibus, and there will be an end of it."

"If the public takes no account of it I shall."

"What ! you will amuse yourself in playing the policeman ! That is the climax !"

"A fellow must have employment for his leisure moments, and I have time to spare."

"And your picture, wretched man—your picture which was to be ready for the show ?"

"I will set about it in the spring. I have a couple of months before me, and before they have passed I shall have found the perpetrator of this ugly deed."

"But once more—what means could she have employed to send a young girl under twenty into the other world, in less than ten seconds ? You won't maintain, I suppose, that she stabbed her ?"

"Stabbed ! oh, no ; there are surer and quieter means. Poison, for instance. The strongest man may be struck down with a drop of prussic acid."

"When it is put in the eye or on the tongue, yes."

"Or in any other spot where the skin is rubbed. You shrug your shoulders ? Well, I won't hope to convince you this evening. But tomorrow you will perhaps admit that I was right. Meanwhile, I leave you. I am going to stroll in the direction of the station to learn what is said about all this. I know the police sergeant." And the amateur detective thereupon darted from the café, exclaiming, "You will settle my account —there were only fourteen glasses !"

II.

"DAYS follow days, but do not resemble each other," says the proverb. On the morning after the melancholy omnibus adventure a beautiful winter sun shone over the Place Pigalle. The temperature had suddenly become milder, the water of the fountain sped upward towards the blue sky, and the Italian models, seated on the steps around the basin, warmed themselves in the bright sunshine, while waiting to enter the studios.

And Paul Freneuse was as joyous as the weather. A night's repose had calmed the emotions of the previous day, and dispelled its visions. He had received the visit of the inspector, sent by the commissary of police to talk with, rather than examine him, for "natural" death had been duly vouched for by the physician appointed to examine the dead girl's remains, and during the interval which must elapse before the doctor's statement could be verified by an autopsy, the body was to be conveyed to the Morgue, as no indication had been found which served to establish the girl's identity. There were no facts to warrant the supposition of a crime. Upon this point the evidence given by the omnibus conductor before the commissary was clear and precise. All parties were agreed, and Fren-

euse, relieved of an unpleasant subject of preoccupation, breakfasted with a good appetite, and then set to work with zest.

He was engaged in completing a picture by which he hoped to achieve one of those successes which insure an artist an undisputed rank in his profession. It was the figure of a woman tending a goat near the tomb of Cecilia Metella, and he had had the good fortune to discover a model who seemed to have been created for the express purpose of furnishing him with the type he had dreamed of. She was a pretty young girl, scarcely more than a child, whom he had met one day coming from the heights of Montmartre, and who inquired of him the way to the Jardin des Plantes. Freneuse had passed four years in Rome, and knew enough Italian to be able to furnish the desired information in the only language which the girl understood. He inquired what she was doing in Paris, whereupon she replied that she had just arrived there with one of her countrymen, who was engaged in collecting models of both sexes, and who resided in the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Bernard, near the Halle aux Vins, in a large house, full of organ-grinders and other strolling musicians. She was born at Subiaco, in the Sabine mountains, where she spent her childhood leading goats through the rocky pathways. Her mother, who died a year previously, had posed in the studios at Rome. She had never known her father. But she had an older sister, who had been carried off several years previously by a man who trained singers for the Italian stage.

Struck by her beauty, Paul Freneuse immediately thought of turning this yet unknown model to his own profit; and with this object he obtained an interview with the agent who had brought her to Paris, and, in consideration of a round sum, induced him to sign an agreement to lodge Pia suitably and separately, to send her every day to the Place Pigalle for a sitting, and to decline overtures from other artists. So during five months Pia had not once failed to appear at Paul's studio at noon, and was received there rather as a friend than as a hireling.

Pia was no commonplace beauty. She was not one of those Italian bambini who have all the same big dark eyes, the same rosy full lips, the same clear brown skin, and are fashioned, as it were, in one mould. She belonged to the race that has supplied models for painters through all time, but her face had an expressiveness commonly lacking to the girls of her country—there was something unusually characteristic, mobile, animated, and intelligent, in her countenance. And her physiognomy was not deceptive. Pia had a mind above her station, and a wonderful quickness of perception. In a few months she learned to speak French, and amused Paul by her *naïve* remarks and unlooked-for repartees, surprising him by the accuracy of her observations on general topics, and even on art, of which she had keen intuition. She retained the costume of her country, unmarred by any of the Parisian fashions. No shawl had ever covered her somewhat slender but beautifully outlined shoulders, no boot had ever imprisoned her statuesque foot, accustomed to tread the mountain thyme. And the life she led was modest and virtuous, for she only went out to repair to Freneuse's studio, and did not mix either with her own countrywomen or with the others of her sex who exercised the perilous profession of models in Paris.

Although, thanks to Freneuse's generosity, she no longer had to lead the life in common which poverty imposes upon poor girls brought from Italy by a master, she still resided in the house in the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Bernard, but quite apart from the vagrant colony which encamped in this

species of phalanstery. She occupied a small garret, where the only furniture was a small iron bedstead, three rush-bottomed chairs, and a broken looking-glass. There the hours she spent away from the studio were passed in reading—she had learned to read—in singing her own mountain songs, and in dreaming—of what? Freneuse amused himself sometimes by questioning her, but she replied to his questions that she did not know herself. What she earned by sitting to her benefactor satisfied, and more than satisfied, her needs, for she ate scarcely more than a bird, and expended little upon her toilet, although extremely careful of her person and attire. And she was gay as Italians seldom are—gay, with that frank gaiety which of itself brings content and freedom from care. When she entered Paul's studio, joy seemed to go in with her.

For a month, however, Paul fancied that she had been less laughing, more reserved and thoughtful—in a word, less childlike. She had ceased to play with the pet cat of the studio—a superb Angora, who had conceived a great affection for her, and never failed to spring upon her lap as soon as she had assumed her pose. One day he questioned her, but instead of replying she began to cry, and he had desisted, though the solution which occurred to him was somewhat saddening. Freneuse was attached to the girl, and grieved at the thought of her being perhaps infatuated with some uncouth herdsman who had come from the Abruzzes to Paris to collect a few sous by performing on the hurdy-gurdy. He even began to ask himself whether he were not jealous; then he became grave, almost cold, and the sitting elapsed without his barely saying a word to the poor girl, who went out heavy hearted. But on the day which followed the omnibus adventure Paul was in the liveliest of moods, and chatted gaily with the girl, who was half reclining at the other end of the studio on a high step, destined to figure as a block of marble detached from the tomb of Cecilia Metella.

"Pia, my beauty," he said, "I was very near climbing your six stories yesterday evening to give you a surprise. I dined in your neighbourhood."

"And did not come to see me!" she exclaimed. "I should have liked so much to show you my room, it is so pretty now. I have three flower-pots, and a bird that sings so nicely. It is to you I owe all that."

"I was afraid of disturbing you. Your room is scarcely larger than the bird-cage. And then—to come upon you unexpectedly, *ma foi!* I should not have dared. I might have met your lover."

Pia turned very pale, and tears came to her eyes. "Why do you say that?" she murmured. "You know I have no lover."

"Come, little one," resumed Freneuse gaily, "don't cry. It will make you look ugly and disarrange your pose. Did you weep when you led your goat to pasture in the mountains?"

"No, never, nor here either except when you try to vex me. No one can make me weep but you."

"And laugh, too. Come, laugh a little or I shall think you are angry. I was not serious."

"So much the better! Then it is already forgotten. But, pray, don't tell me that I have a lover. Where should I find one? All the men that work for Father Lorenzo are as ugly and vicious as monkeys. On the Place Pigalle, then—on the steps of the fountain? If you looked out of your window when I'm coming you would see that I never stop there. I am in a hurry to reach your studio and warm myself and embrace Mirza—she's my lover." The cat, hearing her name, sprung upon Pia's lap, and

the girl went on : " She loves me, you see ; she comes when I call her and never teases me."

" You are right, little one. Mirza is a good cat. She is better than I am, or that animal of a Binos, who never comes here without tormenting you."

" Oh, that's nothing ; but you, Monsieur Paul, when you tease me I lose my head—and the pose. See ! I hadn't moved since the beginning of the sitting, and now that you have worried me I can't place myself again."

" As you were a moment ago—the head a little back. Look at me. Drive Mirza away and don't move." Pia obeyed and the cat resumed her favourite spot. " That's perfect, and as a reward for your good behaviour I will tell you that I did not go to say good evening to you yesterday, because it was late when I passed along your street—a quarter to twelve. Everybody was asleep in the barracks where Lorenzo lodges his *pifferari*."

" I was not asleep," said Pia in a low voice.

" At that unseasonable hour ! you were wrong, little one. Girls of your age should go to roost with the birds—at sunset, or the ' Ave Maria,' as they say in your country."

" That is what I generally do, but yesterday—"

" No explanations, mademoiselle ; you will change your position again, if you begin prattling, and I have no time to lose. The day is getting on, and so that you may not be tempted to talk I will tell you a story about something that happened to me on returning from your miserable neighbourhood."

" Oh ! Monsieur Paul, I will promise not to speak a word."

" But, my story will make you cry, and just now I have your eyes to deal with."

" No harm befall you, I hope ? "

" No, no, you can see that for yourself, I have never been in so fine a mood for work. If the humour lasts my picture will be finished in a fortnight."

" And then—shall I come no more ? " asked Pia, quickly.

" There now, your expression has changed. To your pose, little one, to your pose ! After this I shall paint another picture in which you will be standing—three hours on your feet at a stretch. You will be so tired that you won't want to talk."

At this moment the door of the studio opened and Binos entered like a bombshell. " I have seen her, my dear fellow ! " he cried, " she's really adorable ! "

" Who do you mean ? " asked Freneuse.

" Why the dead woman, of course. I have just arrived from the Morgue. She has been shown there for an hour, and there is quite a crowd already."

Freneuse no sooner heard the words, " I have arrived from the Morgue," than he began making signs which were intelligible enough ; but once launched, Binos was not to be checked, and he resumed imperturbably : " You are right, she is beautiful. If she had chosen to sit she might have earned twenty francs an hour. Pia is a rare model, but she doesn't approach her. I tried to take a sketch of her but the police forced me away, and a fool called me a heartless scamp. As if I hadn't more heart than he ! What I did was in the interests of art. Fortunately she will be photographed."

" Will you be quiet, you wretched babbler," exclaimed Freneuse, " If you speak another word I'll put you outside the door."

"Why? What harm am I doing?"

"First, you hinder my work; and, secondly, you frighten this child with your ugly stories."

"What! because I speak of the Morgue? On the contrary, it will divert her. I wager she never passes it without going in, and she must pass by it nearly every day."

"Binos, my boy, for the second time I enjoin you to be quiet, and I warn you that at the third injunction, if you don't obey—well, you know how mobs were dispersed under the Empire."

"Threats! violence! What is the matter with you this morning? Yesterday you could talk of nothing but your adventure."

"Again!"

"I didn't know that mademoiselle was so impressible. I will be as mute as a fish till she has gone off, and then I shall have a host of things to recount."

"Leave me in peace meanwhile: I have no time to lose. Resume your pose, dear Pia, and if this madcap presumes to open his mouth again, do me the favour not to listen."

"The Morgue is the place where dead people are exhibited, is it not?" she asked in agitation.

"Come, now! You have both sworn that I shall do nothing to-day."

"I know where it is," she went on, "but I have never dared to go in—never, oh! never."

"Of course! I hope not. But I may as well end the sitting. Three minutes and I will finish, little one—one touch more. I was beginning to catch the shade when this animal interrupted me. I have it now—don't stir."

Pia had become dreamy, and her big dark eyes, fixed abstractedly upon Mirza, expressed nothing.

Binos, to console himself for his silence, rummaged in all the corners of the studio, turned the pictures which were facing the wall round about, opened the boxes of paints, and fumbled about the easel.

"Will you never cease turning about? What are you looking for?"

"Some tobacco; I forgot to buy any," replied the scapegrace, waving a long pipe, which seldom quitted him, in the air.

"There is a tobacco-pot near the window."

"Very well. Then you don't carry severity so far as to forbid me to smoke? Thanks for your indulgence, prince. Ah! this is a sorry joke: there is no more tobacco in your pot than there was brains in the cranium of my imbecile at the Morgue."

"What a bore you are! Look in my overcoat pocket for my pouch."

"I obey you, my lord," replied Binos gravely, bringing his two hands to his forehead in imitation of an Oriental salute; and he began searching the overcoat, while Freneuse, wiping his brush, said: "That will do for today, little one. I can see no more."

"Your tobacco-pouch!" growled Binos, "there is no pouch to be found by exploring this luxurious garment. I find nothing except—stay—a woman's pin!"

Delighted with the result of his investigations, Binos triumphantly brandished the gilt pin which he had just drawn from his friend's pocket.

"Ah! my dear friend, you cram your pockets with articles used by the fair sex. What princess left you this token of her love?"

Freneuse had entirely forgotten the pin which he had found in the

omnibus, and which in all probability had belonged to the dead girl. "Be kind enough to replace the pin where you found it," he said, feeling that Binos's jest were out of place.

"You fear I might profane it by applying it to common uses. Reassure yourself; I shall only use it to clean out my pipe: you can still wear it on your heart. Ah! you are in love, then! Since when?"

"Binos, you exasperate me."

Pia had sprung up, and hastened to examine the pin more closely.

"What do you say to it, child of the mountains? You never wore such pins at Subiaco, and have even the good taste not to do so in Paris. The woman who stuck this bauble in her hair is unworthy of loving an artist, and Paul ought to blush for having so carefully preserved this pious relic—a ridiculous product of Parisian industry, bought at some bazaar for fifteen sous. Help me, little one, to put our friend to shame for his grotesque admiration for the wearer of this wretched gew-gaw. What the deuce are you crying for? Do you want it yourself? Have you the unseemly fancy to dishonour your beautiful hair by—"

"I am not crying," murmured the girl, forcing back her tears.

"Binos, you are insufferable," said Freneuse. "I forbid you to torment the child. Let her go in peace. Put on your mantle, Pia, and spin off to the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Bernard. It is growing late, and the streets are not wholesome for you after nightfall. Try and be here to-morrow punctually at twelve. I will lock my door, so that no bores of our acquaintance shall disturb us, and we will have a long sitting."

Pia was soon ready, and as Freneuse offered her his hand she bent over and kissed it, in Italian fashion. He raised her quickly and kissed her forehead. The girl changed colour but did not speak, and went out without a look at Binos, who was laughing in his sleeve. "My dear boy," he began, as soon as Pia had disappeared, "I have made more discoveries in one day than our most illustrious navigators in a century, and the last is the most curious of all. I have just discovered that this transplanted goat-herdess is in love with you. She shed tears because she thought your pin had belonged to your sweetheart. She is jealous, and so she adores you. Refute this reasoning if you dare."

"I will refute nothing; but I declare that if you don't cease, we shall quarrel."

"Lastly, whence came this skewer, which might be used to serve kidneys at a two-franc restaurant? Is it a souvenir of your beloved one? I thought you meditated making a discreet choice. It is asserted that you have been seen lately in some sober drawing-rooms where one can meet well-educated damsels who would gladly espouse an artist who makes forty thousand a year."

"Binos, you talk nonsense. This is a pin which I found yesterday evening in the omnibus and preserved as a memento; it must have fastened the hat of the poor girl who died during the journey."

"Bal! this is a kind of pin used by cooks when they rig themselves out in their Sunday best, and I answer for it that the young girl who lies on a marble slab at the Morgue wasn't one of that set. I should think it more probable it was lost by one of her neighbours in the omnibus."

"Then I will make you a present of it," said Freneuse.

"I accept it. It will be a means of conviction. The slightest thing will aid in the detection of a murderer—a nothing, a scrap of paper, a cloak-button overlooked on the scene of the crime. In melodramatic language it

is called the finger of God. I have an idea! Where is Mirza? Here, Mirza!" called Binos in a caressing tone.

"What do you want with my cat? Don't torment her."

Mirza, allured by the inviting gestures of the miscreant, came towards him slowly, sedately, like a cat mindful of her own self-respect. "Don't go, Mirza," said Freneuse. "Don't you see this gentleman is fooling you? He has nothing for you."

"That's true; but I may caress my friends' cats, though I don't support them. Mirza is a disinterested animal; she loves me for myself. Let me testify my affection by stroking her fur."

While talking in this random fashion to divert his friend's attention, Binos seated himself on a stool and extended a perfidious hand to the too confiding Angora. Freneuse did not perceive that Binos held in his hand the gilt pin, the point of which protruded between his thumb and forefinger. But Mirza saw it, and she was curious, and a gourmand—the smallest defects in cats of good family—and drew near to ascertain what it was her master's friend had to offer. Her nose came in contact with the point, and Binos profited by the situation to make a slight puncture. The poor creature made one single movement backward; her head fell on one side, her long hairs bristled up, her legs stiffened, her jaws fell apart and her eyes grew dim; but she did not give the prolonged mew which is the last wail of cats—not a convulsion shook her frame. At the end of twenty or thirty seconds she fell a lifeless mass. "What have you done to Mirza?" cried Freneuse, hastening to raise his favourite. "She is dead!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, like the young girl in the omnibus," replied Binos quietly.

"You have killed her!" exclaimed the young artist angrily. "This is beyond endurance. Go off, and never show your face here again."

"You drive me away?"

"Yes, for you make war upon all I love. You have done nothing but mischief since you came. Pia went away in tears, and now you must murder a poor animal which was the joy of my studio. If I didn't know that you are three-fourths mad I shouldn't content myself with closing my door upon you—I should demand satisfaction for your odious conduct."

"It would be droll," retorted Binos drily, "to give me a thrust of your sword in return for saving your life."

"Saving my life!"

"Nothing more or less, my dear fellow!"

"I should be glad to know how. Do you mean to assert that my cat was mad?"

"No; Mirza was an irreproachable cat, and if she has been guilty of malpractices, for instance, such as tearing my trousers, her death has made amends for them, for she has perished for her master and to prevent a great crime from going unpunished. If I had not had an inspiration, a mishap would have befallen you. You see this pin?"

"Yes, and if I had known you would pierce Mirza's heart with it—"

"I have not pierced her heart. Not a drop of blood stains her white fur. I merely pricked her nose and she fell dead. Now do you understand what took place in the omnibus? The poor girl was killed, as I have just killed Mirza—only she was pricked on the arm."

"With this pin?"

"Yes. The pin was poisoned, *mon cher*, and you carried it in your overcoat pocket. In searching this pocket for your handkerchief or tobacco-

pouch, your fingers would infallibly have come in contact with the point of this amiable implement, and at the next fine art show there would have been a picture and a medal the less. It is a miracle, indeed, that I am still alive. Had I taken the pin by the point instead of the head, you would have had nothing left but to bury me. It would be no great disaster, and art would have lost nothing—still, I prefer that the catastrophe should have happened to your cat."

"And I too," said Freneuse, so agitated that he scarcely knew what he said.

"Thanks for this kind word," said the scapegrace, with an ironical grimace. "I learn with pleasure that you don't bear me a grudge for having saved your life, and I must sincerely congratulate you upon having picked up this little implement. It will help to detect its inventor."

"But poisons which strike one dead like that only exist in romance."

"And on the points of the arrows of savages. See this reddish substance on the point of the pin. This chemical product would suffice to destroy a regiment of Prussians. I have always regretted that our bayonets were not steeped in it during the siege."

"Speak seriously. This is no jesting matter, if what you say be true."

"Do you still doubt? If you wish to convince yourself, you need only look at Mirza. Now let me recount to you the whole affair. This instrument must have been prepared by the man who rode outside. It has an innocent air, and if it had been observed in the hands of the jade who made use of it, would not have incriminated her. He employed the woman, because it would have been scarcely natural for the young girl to recline on the shoulder of a man."

"Then he foresaw that she would faint?"

"Perfectly, my dear fellow. The effects of curare, as I believe this poison to be, are as well understood as those of arsenic. This pretty poison has been the subject of numerous experiments at the laboratory of the Collège de France. The plan was, that the woman should sustain the girl until an opportunity occurred to get rid of her without danger. If she had fallen, a scene would have ensued, in which the murderer did not desire to participate."

"How can you account for this horrible woman leaving the poisoned pin, which would betray her, in the omnibus?"

"You may be sure that she did not do so designedly. The pin slipped from her hand, and the jade could not stoop to pick it up. Firstly, she was afraid of pricking herself; and then, she had to sustain the dead girl. When the time came for her to leave, she was in too much haste to stop to look for it."

"She might, however, have foreseen that this palpable proof of her crime would be discovered."

"Bah! she hoped the man who swept the omnibus would brush it out. It mattered nothing to her whether the pin carried death with it. Such a knave of a woman is little concerned about a murder more or less."

"She must be a monster indeed, to murder a poor child whom she did not know, in cold blood."

"What!" exclaimed Binos, "you fancy she killed her for the pleasure of killing her, or to try the virtues of her pretty instrument—like the Marchioness de Brinvilliers distributed poisoned cakes to the poor who asked alms of her, so as to observe the effect of her poisons. Freneuse, my friend, these experiments are dangerous, and consequently out of vogue."

This creature knew what she was about. It was this young girl she wished to dispose of, and none other."

"But why? What had the poor child done to her?"

"I am not yet prepared to answer that; I must have time. At present I content myself with asserting that the crime had a motive. There is always a possible reason for wishing to get rid of a woman, and reasons of more than one sort—vengeance, jealousy, cupidity."

"But I am at a loss to imagine how you, who have not even seen the parties, can flatter yourself that you can trace them."

"Oh, as to that, I have my system. I shall proceed mathematically, from the known to the unknown. When I ascertain who the young girl was I shall find out her friends, and I should be stupid indeed not to discern who amongst them were interested in making away with her."

"You forget that the man and woman in the omnibus were strangers, as they did not speak a word to her."

"They acted on behalf of others."

"That is a hazardous supposition. Besides, your plan lacks a foundation to build upon. No one knows either the name or residence of the deceased."

"That is true. I learned as much from the registrar. I was about to repeat to you my conversation with this functionary when you stopped me. He told me that an old purse, containing fourteen sous, was found in the girl's pocket, and a small bunch of keys, attached to a steel ring. The linen bore no mark. There was no card or scrap of paper—"

"A scrap of paper!" exclaimed Freneuse. "That reminds me that I picked one up in the omnibus."

"You found a paper and didn't speak of it!" exclaimed Binos. "What have you done with it—not burned it, I hope?"

"No, but I may have lost it. I placed it in my overcoat pocket, with the pin which served to poison my cat—poor Mirza!"

Binos again went to the overcoat and drew from its pocket a crumpled paper. "Thank Heaven! it is still there," he exclaimed; "this is it, is it not?"

"I believe so, but I pocketed it without examining it."

"Why did you pick it up, if not for the purpose of looking at it?"

"I intended to do so, but I entered the café, where your nonsense made me lose my wits. But you have it now—so tell me the contents."

"It is a letter, my dear boy. Ah, the deuce! it is torn in two, but I shall decipher it all the same. They have discovered the meaning of the birds and insects on the obelisk; that is more difficult than to fill in missing lines. Moreover, we are two. Listen: 'My dear—' The next word is torn off. My dear friend, or my dear—, some Christian name; it's a pity it is missing, but the person addressed is a woman."

"The writer is a man, it appears—the handwriting is masculine."

"Yes; it is firm, large, and somewhat irregular—not a mercantile hand. Let us have the rest: 'At last the time has come. I am sure my . . . arrived a month ago. She resides in the Rue des . . . goes out very little, but sometimes in the evening to . . . do not know yet to whose house, but . . . return to my first project, for it is more . . . not to delay. Do me the favour to . . . our arrangements. They want to have all ended by . . . not a word to any one, not even to . . . discovered that persons in the house suspected . . . To-morrow, then, dear Z—' Ah! the lady's name, then, begins with Z. That is something."

"And the signature?" asked Freneuse.

"It is torn off," said Binos, who had read the letter aloud, pausing at each unconnected sentence.

"Then! you are not much the wiser. It is perfectly unintelligible. All that you learn is that the deceased was named Zélie, or Zéphyrine, or Zénobie, or—"

"You fancy, then, that it was she who dropped this paper?"

"I know nothing about it at all! but if she didn't, who did?"

"The other—the woman who made use of the pin. That fragment of paper has served to wrap up the poisoned pin. See how it is crumpled."

"Yes; and she took care to tear the letter, so that it would be perfectly unintelligible."

"Do you think so? The meaning is as clear to me as if nothing were missing. Its purport is, the murder of the poor girl who sleeps on a marble slab at the Morgue. I will take the lines one by one. 'At last the time has come.' That means the moment to act has arrived. 'Arrived a month ago.' Who? The young girl, evidently; and this agrees with our ideas. She is not Parisian; it is even probable that she is not French. I looked at her attentively. It is not our pale sun that gilded her complexion."

"True, she was of the Spanish type."

"Say, if you like, that she came from the heart of Andalusia. What was she here for? The writer of the letter doubtless knew, and had been watching her. 'She goes out very little, but sometimes in the evening.' Where? He did not yet know, but it was enough for him that she went somewhere. He had a project which he wished to execute without delay. 'They want to have all ended by'—here is part of a sentence which clearly establishes the situation. He receives orders—he operates for another. This rascal is simply a hired assassin."

"Yes," murmured Freneuse; "but it is all very vague."

"Excuse me, the second line gives us an indication. She resides in the Rue des. "'She' is certainly this girl. She resides in the Rue des, not the Rue de. Now, how many Rue des are there in Paris? Very few, are there not?"

"You are mistaken: there are a good many. I can mention a dozen from memory—the Rue des Amandiers, the Rue des Bons-Enfants, the Rue des Blancs-Manteaux, the Rue des Cannettes, the Rue des Quatre-Vents, the Rue des Deux-Ecus, the Rue des Mauvais-Garçons—"

"Enough! you will give me the whole 'Directory,' and I prefer to consult it at my leisure. If there are fifty, I shall inspect them all. I shall go from house to house, inquiring whether a young girl has not disappeared."

"And at the end of three or four months you may, perhaps, have found out something," said Freneuse, shrugging his shoulders. "It would be much simpler to place the pin and the torn letter in the hands of the commissary of police, who will open an inquest, and, with the means at his disposal, soon discover the victim's abode."

"So be it. Then you will accompany me to the magistrate?"

"I! Oh, no, indeed! I have already told you that I have no time to lose."

"As you like, but I can do nothing without you—I mean nothing official. If I appear before the commissary, I must tell him whom I obtained the incriminating articles from. I must also describe the death of your cat,

I believe he would even ask to see Mirza's corpse, and perhaps order an autopsy."

"Never!" exclaimed Freneuse. "They sha'n't dissect my cat. It is quite enough for you to have murdered her."

"Then it is useless to report the matter to the commissary," replied Binos. "If it is placed in the hands of the police, you must expect to be long and frequently examined. At present no one believes in a crime; but if the poisoning of Mirza is established, matters will change in aspect. Dogs and rabbits will be sacrificed; medical men will make reports on the effects of curare, and a doubt of the murder will no longer exist. All the detectives will go to work, and, as you alone remarked the murderer and her accomplice, you will be asked to accompany these officers in their expeditions in search of the guilty parties."

"Bah! Is a man to be dragged from private life to take part in such business as that? You are making fun of me."

"I will admit that the picture is a trifle overdrawn, but you may rest assured you will be called in every time a suspicious man or woman is arrested, and have to determine whether he or she shall be released or not."

"A charming prospect! to be all day long at the orders of the police! Do as you please. All that I ask is not to be mixed up with it."

"Then you will intrust me with the pin and the torn letter, and allow me to operate as I please? It is understood that we are to dispense with the commissary."

"Yes, but—"

"But what?"

"I am not sure that we have a right to conceal what we know. It would be the part of a good citizen to warn the authorities, instead of hiding one's light under a bushel."

"I beg pardon, but I mean to do so when the times comes—that is to say, when I hold the rascally pair. The police will owe me thanks, for I shall have prepared their task, and the trial will be half over when I deliver up the criminals."

"Really, now, your confidence in your abilities is to be admired. No doubt you propose to operate alone?"

"Not entirely. I have qualifications which would insure me a first rank as a bloodhound, but I want practice. At the outset I need a guide, an instructor, not in the great principles—these I have intuitively divined—but to acquaint me with the ins and outs of the business; and in fact I have already such a man at hand."

"Ah! Bah!"

"Why! yes. He is a gentleman whom I often meet at a *café*—not in this neighbourhood. He has conceived a friendship for me because I drew his portrait in red crayon at sight. He is fond of talking about the detective business and talks about it well, too. I believe he once belonged to it."

"The deuce! you have nice acquaintances!"

"Well! what would you have me to do? I can't pass my evenings in the drawing-rooms of the Faubourg Saint-Germain; the aristocracy always forget to invite me. But if you knew this honest fellow Piédoch, you would understand the pleasure I take in his society. He is full of wit and amusing anecdotes."

"I don't doubt it, but will dispense with being introduced to him, and even beg to hear no more of him. And now that we have come to an agree-

ment, be good enough to relieve me of everything that recalls this lugubrious story. Carry off the letter, the pin, and even Mirza's corpse."

"Nothing would please me better, and I will relieve you of myself at the same time."

"A parting injunction," said Freneuse. "Don't speak of all this before Pia. She is very excitable, and—"

"Have no fears. If she asks what has become of your cat, I will say that she was poisoned by licking paints from your palette."

III.

PAUL FRENEUSE had reasons of his own for not caring to prolong an interview which would have proved interminable if he had entertained the strange visions and fancies of his friend Binos. While recognising the probability of the fact that the girl in the omnibus had been murdered, he was far from believing in the possibility of tracing the criminals. Besides, he had no inclination to embark in an enterprise which would make demands upon his time and prevent him from working at his profession. He was bent on winning an independent position, and was in a fair way to attain his object. He had already acquired the reputation which leads to renown, sometimes to glory, and for this he was solely indebted to his own exertions. His father, who had hoped to leave him a handsome fortune, was ruined by one of those great financial crashes which shake even the most strongly established firms. He died of grief and disappointment, but leaving an unsullied name behind him, for he sacrificed everything to discharge his liabilities. Paul's only surviving relative, a cousin in the provinces, had placed a thousand francs at his disposal to enable him to seek his fortune in foreign parts. But as he had no inclination for gold digging or diamond hunting, and on the contrary felt kindly disposed towards art, he utilized these alms in journeying to Rome where he worked for his livelihood and instruction. He went off as a pupil and returned a master—a young and unquestioned master, but appreciated by fellow artists and liked by the purchasing public. Critics disputed concerning his style, but they acknowledged his merits, and he had difficulty in executing all the orders he obtained. So reputation and money alike fell to his lot.

Whilst chiefly valuing fame, he was not insensible to the fact that in this world of ours it is money that assures liberty, and so he tried to win them both. "When riches are mine," he argued, "or even a competence, I may give myself up wholly to art, which I place above all else. Fortune is not the object of life, but it is a means." And to arrive more speedily at the independent position he longed for, Paul sometimes thought of marriage. It will easily be believed that fitting opportunities were not wanting. For several years no winter had elapsed without bringing him numerous invitations—invitations to balls and dinners, where he was presented to marriageable young ladies. But though he had shown some little attention to various damsels, he was resolved not to allow himself to be captivated, save understandingly. He attached a value to certain moral qualities, and on the subject of beauty had artistic ideas of his own.

At the beginning of the present season, however, his attention had been attracted to the daughter of a gentleman who had formerly had business relations with his father, and who welcomed the son all the more cordially as he was on the road to riches and fame. And Mademoiselle Marguerite

Paulet well deserved to be remarked, for she was marvellously beautiful ; as beautiful as Pia, though she bore no more resemblance to her than day bears to night. Pia was a beautiful brunette, while Mademoiselle Paulet was fair and rosy. Pia was rather slight and her delicate form was as yet but a promise ; but Mademoiselle Paulet was tall, and though scarcely twenty, her luxuriant beauty had reached its full development. Pia resembled one of Raffael's Madonnas, Mademoiselle Paulet one of Rubens' Flemish beauties. And Paul Freneuse, who though preferring the Italian style, loved the masters of all the schools, viewed with ardent admiration the charms of the captivating heiress who had graciously accorded him so many waltzes since the beginning of the season.

For Mademoiselle Marguerite was an heiress. After being in "business"—the term used to designate a man who has enriched himself by speculation—her father was now enjoying a handsome fortune, said to have been honourably acquired. Her mother had died, leaving her two hundred thousand francs, of which she would obtain possession upon attaining her majority. Mademoiselle Paulet was very partial to society, and Paul Freneuse gladly accepted the invitations to M. Paulet's exquisite dinners, both out of regard for the *cuisine* and for Mademoiselle Marguerite's beauty.

At the last dinner, she had expressed a desire to see the "Chevaliers du Brouillard," * which had just been produced at the Porte-Saint-Martin, and Paul, having ascertained which of their evenings was free from engagements, secured for them the use of a front box. It was on the evening of the very day which had witnessed the death of the unfortunate Mirza. Binos, her murderer, had scarcely left the studio when a note of thanks was received from M. Paulet, and an invitation to join them in the box. The artist was scarcely in a frame of mind to enjoy an evening in the charming society of Mademoiselle Marguerite. The omnibus tragedy had saddened him, and Binos's projects disquieted him. However, he could not, under pain of being considered discourteous, refrain from at least going to the theatre and offering his respects both to father and daughter. So he concluded to dress ; and as the weather was fine he went on foot to dine at a club of which he was a member, but where he rarely appeared. The members present chanced to be lively, and their conversation soon dispelled his gloom, which, after all, was not serious ; and when the time came for him to direct his steps towards the Porte-Saint-Martin, he had entirely forgotten the causes of his pre-occupation, and was prepared to be agreeable. But it was decreed that accident should call up an unpleasant re-collection.

Pausing under the peristyle of the theatre to finish an excellent cigar, he was not a little surprised to hear himself addressed in this style : "To be sure—I'm not mistaken—it is you yourself !"

The speaker was a stout woman, with a silk handkerchief about her head, and a basket of oranges before her. Freneuse did not at first recognise her, but she left him no time to search his memory. " You don't remember me ? " she continued, in a coarse voice. " You sat opposite me yesterday in the Halle aux Vins omnibus."

" Ah ! I remember," stammered the artist, in surprise.

Persons whom chance has thrown together in a public conveyance do not commonly deem it necessary to exchange greetings upon meeting in the street the next day. " I say," began the woman once more, " there's a story there. That child—she died on the road, eh ? I would have bet my

* A popular French melodrama based on the adventures of Jack Sheppard.—[TRANS.]

life she was asleep. It was funny—supporting a corpse on one's shoulder and not suspecting it!"

"What! you knew—"

"I heard about it on the Place Pigalle this morning. I take the omnibus every day to buy oranges in the Rue des Halles, so they know me; and when they told me there was a tall, dark young man that helped to take the body out, I guessed it was you—a pretty safe guess, seeing there was no other man inside."

"It is singular that you should remember my face."

"Oh, when once I see a face, I don't forget it. You think, perhaps, I took no notice of the fellow who gave up his seat? He didn't stay five minutes. Well, I'd have no need to look twice to say, 'that's he.'"

"Then you would also recognise the lady that profited by his politeness?"

"Oh, as to her, no indeed! She never showed the end of her nose. With the veils that women wear now-a-days, it's more than being masked. It ought to be forbidden, because—supposing a woman's done something bad—once off, how is she to be caught? Stop! that reminds me that the omnibus inspector said you had taken it into your head the girl had been murdered. How could that be, I'd like to know? It's no surprise to me that she went off without a breath. You could see she was sickly by that complexion of hers. I went to the Morgue to look at her. She wasn't the least changed; she looked just as if she was asleep."

"You knew her, then?" exclaimed Freneuse.

"I've seen her a dozen times, at least, at the market on the Place Saint-Pierre at Montmartre. I live in the Chaussée Clignancourt."

"Then you know who she was?" asked Freneuse, quickly.

"As to that—no; I never spoke to her. At my age a woman doesn't prate with young folks, especially when she doesn't know 'em. But she had dark eyes—so bright you might have lit your cigar by 'em—and skin like white satin."

"If she often came to the Montmartre Market she must have resided in that neighbourhood."

"Oh, for certain," replied the woman.

"And perhaps some of the market people who sold things to her might know her street and number?"

"They must have taken little account of her; for she only bought a few eggs, vegetables, and salad—didn't spend thirty sous a day. And, with all, as proud as a little queen; she just asked 'em the price, and when she found it too dear she walked on."

"And she was always alone?" asked Freneuse, induced to pursue the inquest in spite of himself, like a simple Binos.

"Always."

"You have been to the Morgue, so no doubt you told the registrar what you have said to me?"

"Not I! If I'd told my story, I'd have been in for it for two hours, and should have to talk to-morrow to that hound of a commissary. And what good would it have done? I haven't the name of the child, nor her address. But that doesn't matter after all; if you need me, I'm at your service—Virginie Pilon, Chaussée Clignancourt, at the corner of the Rue Muller. I see the poor girl's story interests you. Now, excuse me, *mon prince*, but while I prattle I'm selling no oranges. It's not you that'll buy 'em, is it? My wares are not for gentlemen." And quitting Freneuse, she cried out, "Three sous a-piece! beautiful Valencias, three sous a-piece!"

It was time to enter the theatre. The first act had finished, and during the interval before the second one began, Paul wished to make his appearance in M. Paulet's box. So he followed the spectators who were returning inside after smoking their cigarettes on the boulevard and ascended the stairway leading to the front boxes. The meeting with the orange-woman had somewhat damped the joyous humour in which he had left his club. This lamentable story it seemed must needs pursue him everywhere. And what irritated him the more was, that he could not rid himself of it. It interested him in spite of himself. It was in vain that he reasoned that the death of this young girl in no way concerned him, and that the designs of his dear comrade were utterly senseless ; all the same, he lent a willing ear to the remarks of a gossiping woman, and found his curiosity excited by the information he gleaned from her. "To the deuce with orange-women and poisoned pins !" he exclaimed. "This evening I have nothing to do but to please an adorable girl, whose name is Marguerite Paulet. If I can only obtain the permission of her father and herself to paint her portrait for the show next year, it will be a success which will fully console me for never discovering the pair that concocted this dark deed."

Whilst thus discoursing with himself, Freneuse tried to pierce his way through the crowd which surrounded him, but with indifferent success. Just in front of him there was a tall, sturdy fellow, whose broad back seemed formed not to make haste, but rather to excite the impatience of those who came after him. After sundry fruitless attempts to glide between the wall and this person, Freneuse had recourse to a push to induce him to move on. The man turned, grumbling a few uncivil words, and in doing so showed his face to the artist, who experienced a strange sensation. The face recalled that of the outside passenger of the omnibus. It was the same kind of countenance, fashioned, as it were, with strokes of the hatchet; the same military whiskers, the same hard features. The costume alone was different ; instead of the felt hat and sack overcoat, the man now wore a fine black dress suit and new beaver hat. He cast a rapid glance at Freneuse out of keen eyes, shaded by heavy brows, and doubtless adjudged him unworthy of his wrath ; for instead of addressing him, he instantly resumed his former position, and quickening his gait, was soon lost in the passage leading to the stalls. "It would seem as if he recognised me and got out of the way," thought Freneuse. "If Binos were here and I could communicate my impressions to him, he would follow up this gentleman ; but I am not Binos, and I sha'n't trouble myself to run after him."

With this reflection he continued his route, and soon gained the box he sought for. He had the satisfaction of observing the colour deepen in Mademoiselle Marguerite's cheeks, and was accorded a flattering welcome by M. Paulet. "I knew you would not refuse us your company," said the latter, "and must thank you for giving your evening to us."

He was a little old man, very carefully attired, with quick gestures, ready speech, and a face that would have been prepossessing had it possessed more frankness. His eyes never looked full into yours and were annoyingly restless ; his lips always smiled the same accustomed smile. But the whole was not unpleasing, and M. Paulet would have made the most presentable of fathers-in-law. Mademoiselle Paulet, happily for her, bore no resemblance to her parent. Her height, complexion, and the somewhat *nonchalant* grace which lent her a peculiar charm, were derived, doubtless, from her mother. She had "race," as the word goes, while M. Paulet was a plain old codger, somewhat lacking in distinction. But he admired his daughter,

and was quite contented with himself. Freneuse had understood how to please him by showing him the respect which artists know how to grant to philistines when it is their interest to do so, and by listening with respectful attention when he discoursed in his random style upon painting, ancient and modern masters, without disdaining to reply.

"My dear sir," said M. Paulet, abruptly, "you arrive just in time to settle a disputed point in art between us."

"I must excuse myself in advance," said Freneuse, modestly. "I am satisfied that you are right, and that mademoiselle is not wrong."

"Oh! don't hope to escape by that polite evasion. You are quite competent to decide, and must positively give us your opinion. In the first place, you are the cause of the disagreement."

"I am proud to learn that you and mademoiselle have been so good as to think of me."

"I beg you to believe, my dear Freneuse, that it often happens. You are not to be forgotten by those who know you as we do, and if we did not, your works would well entitle you to be thought of. Your name is in every mouth, my friend. Everybody is talking about the picture you are to exhibit this year. It will be the great success of the show, they tell me, and I believe it. Well, it is this very picture that occasioned our disagreement."

"But," objected the artist, timidly, "I regret that you have not done me the honour to come and see it. You could then have judged—"

"Oh! I know what it is—it is the great topic in the world of art. A young peasant girl seated near the tomb of Metella—no, of Cecilia—a tomb at all events; and you might have chosen a gayer theme, because tombs—well, people don't care to have them in their drawing-rooms, and this might injure the sale of your picture."

"Cecilia Metella died so long ago," said Freneuse seriously, suppressing a strong inclination to laugh.

"That is some excuse, but it is not that which we were discussing. I was maintaining with Marguerite that you artists are wrong to reproduce Italians with such pertinacity, and that for female models, especially, our French women can furnish marvellous types."

"You are right a thousand times, monsieur, and I need not go far to find one," said Freneuse, quickly looking at Mademoiselle Paulet.

"There! what did I tell you?" exclaimed M. Paulet. "Freneuse thinks you would make a superb model."

"I cannot easily fancy myself tending goats," said Mademoiselle Paulet, laughing.

"You would be beautiful in any costume, mademoiselle," said Freneuse eagerly.

"Still I should have to represent the character you have chosen. The Italians are not fair-haired that I know of, as I have the misfortune to be. The sun has not gilded my complexion nor blackened my hair, and my features are absolutely wanting in character."

"Bah!" said M. Paulet, forestalling the compliment that was on Freneuse's lips; "you are very well as you are, and I know many who agree with me."

"I beg you to number me among them," added the artist at once.

"Moreover," resumed the father, "I confess I am unable to go into raptures over these faces which our artists take so much pains to find. They are pretty enough with their lemon-coloured skins and darkly set

eyes—but such dresses! clothes that a cook wouldn't venture to walk out in during Carnival time."

"You are severe on the poor girls," said Freneuse. "They must pursue their avocations and cannot follow the fashion plates."

"I understand that. There must be some local colouring. I know how it is; though I am but a man of the middle-classes. But were I a painter it should be different. I would have a dressing-room, and when I had need of a Fornarina I would choose a French girl, and disguise her to form my model."

"But, papa, it is not at all the same thing," said Mademoiselle Paulet. "The type is so different."

"Let me alone with your type. Beauty is beauty."

Freneuse was silent and began to ask himself whether he could tolerate a father-in-law who uttered such enormities and was so wanting in artistic sentiment. But Marguerite guessed his thoughts and sent him an eloquent glance, which expressed a great many things, and implored leniency for this want of taste in a father who so little resembled his daughter. "The curtain is about to rise, papa," she said; "so you will, perhaps, permit me to look, and even to listen."

Freneuse thought the conversation of the millionaire uninteresting, his opinions on art absurd, and did not care to discuss with him the merits of the girls who came from Italy to France as models. He found it much more agreeable to admire the beautiful face of his daughter, of which he had a three-fourth's view, and which seemed cut from the canvas of some Flemish master. "She is splendid," thought Freneuse, as he noted the pure outlines of her profile with the eye of a connoisseur, "and I believe she has intelligence and heart. The man she loves will be fortunate, and the man she marries will not be obliged to live with her father. I should prefer she were less rich and her father less of a philistine. He lets me see plainly enough that I please him. I cannot tell why, for we don't harmonise in anything. Perhaps he likes to exhibit me to his friends as one exhibits a rare bird. That is a vanity very common with his class. Enriched traders like to pose as friends of artists. But it seems to me there is something more than this—perhaps he desires me for a son-in-law. If so, the first question to be solved is whether I please the daughter. I am not in love with Mademoiselle Marguerite, but I should easily become so if I passed many evenings in her company."

While engaged in these reflections, he devoured Mademoiselle Paulet with his eyes. She appeared to be giving her whole attention to the performance, but she was quite conscious of the effect she was producing on her young neighbour. She began even to feel annoyed by his persistent scrutiny, and to put an end to it, borrowed her father's lorgnette, and turned it on Jack Sheppard, who had just appeared on the stage.

Freneuse understood, and turned his attention towards the stalls below him. His eyes were soon fixed upon a man who stood leaning against one of the front boxes. He would not, perhaps, have arrested the artist's attention—though he stood while all around him were seated—but Paul recognised him as the same gentleman whom he had hustled in the passage, and who vaguely recalled the man who had vacated his seat in the omnibus. This time Freneuse could inspect him at his leisure, for he stood directly opposite, and in the full light; and he did not fail to do so, having no better occupation now that Mademoiselle Paulet was watching the actors and scenery through her glasses. He derived less satisfaction from the

scrutiny of this stranger than from that of the beautiful Marguerite, but this living problem piqued his curiosity, and he made great efforts to recall the features of the man of the omnibus. He was satisfied that a resemblance existed, but failed to arrive at any absolute certainty. Paris is full of men wearing brush-like mustaches and whiskers cut on a level with the ears. The man's height was the same, also the breadth of his shoulders, and a certain abruptness in his movements. He appeared to be making signs to some one from time to time. But all this proved nothing, and Freneuse, less zealous than Binos, was about to desist from the examination, when he saw the gentleman in the stalls speak to a woman at his side. It was a natural circumstance in itself, yet some instinctive feeling told the artist that the woman must be the creature who had made use of the poisoned pin—a conjecture which it was impossible to verify, since she had not once shown her face from the Boulevard Saint-Germain to the Rue de Laval. However, at the first words addressed to her by her male companion, she turned her head towards the Paulets' box, to which he had doubtless drawn her attention. The bright light fell full upon her face, and Freneuse saw that she had large features—quite regular, though too strongly marked for beauty—and a somewhat mottled complexion; still the whole was not unpleasing, nor lacking in distinction. "Am I the person she is eyeing so persistently?" he asked himself. "I doubt it, for I am so placed as to be scarcely visible. Then it must be Monsieur or Mademoiselle Paulet; mademoiselle, probably, for she is beautiful enough to attract attention. It is singular, however; a woman who comes to see a play and is absorbed in the contemplation of a pretty girl."

M. Paulet also gave but little attention to the performances of Jack Sheppard. He was reclining negligently against the partition of the box, displaying the massive chain which hung over his waistcoat and his diamond studs, when he suddenly caught sight of the pair seated in the stalls. The woman immediately turned towards the stage, but the man bowed. It was not a friendly salutation of the hand, but a respectful obeisance, and at such a distance a humble politeness of this sort seemed quite absurd. However, M. Paulet responded by a nod, and the man, satisfied, no doubt, that he had been seen, seated himself, and began whispering to his companion. "Dash it!" exclaimed Freneuse, "I can now easily ascertain the name of this person."

However, Mademoiselle Paulet anticipated the question which he was about to put. "Who is that gentleman, papa?" she inquired. "Do you receive him at home? I don't remember having seen him."

"Do I receive him? Yes, sometimes—in my office in the morning. He is a business agent."

"What is a business agent?" asked the beautiful Marguerite, with a preoccupied air.

"My dear Marguerite, that would require rather a long explanation, and it would interest you but little, I fancy, to know that these gentlemen are paid to attend to the interests which others confide to them. They take charge of difficult outstanding debts, involved liquidations, researches of all sorts. Their specialty is with litigious—"

"That word does not enlighten me much," said Mademoiselle Marguerite, smiling.

"Because you are unfamiliar with the language of business. As to the agent who has just bowed to me across the theatre, the first time I send for him I shall request him to be less demonstrative in public. He is a skilful

man, and honest, I believe ; but that is no reason why he should claim me as an acquaintance before fifteen hundred people. To bow to a capitalist like myself is a kind of advertisement for a poor devil such as he is."

"He is expert in his business, you say ?" inquired the artist.

"Oh, very ; so I am assured. A friend recommended him to me. I intrusted him recently with some very delicate matters, and have not yet had time to judge of the result, but he appears to be unrivalled in gaining information."

"Then, monsieur, I should be obliged to you for placing me in connection with him. I have a debt to recover, and if your agent could—"

"As soon as I see him, and such will shortly be the case, I will send him to you."

"Oh, you need not give yourself that trouble. If you will give me his name and address, I will write and request him to call and see me."

"His name ! Ah, the deuce, it has escaped me. These names, you know, don't rest in one's mind ; but I have his card at home, and to-morrow you shall have it."

"Thank you," said Freneuse, slightly disappointed. He had hoped to astonish Binos by bringing him reliable information of a person who resembled the man of the omnibus, and he found he must wait until M. Paulet was kind enough to send it to him, supposing he ever thought of it again.

"See !" said the capitalist ; "the curtain is being lowered. They make the acts scandalously short—a spectator gets nothing for his money."

"It seems to me it is only the end of a scene," said Mademoiselle Paulet.
"See ! no one is moving."

"Then we shall have a chance to talk. Nothing bores me like being obliged to whisper for fear of disturbing the performance," said M. Paulet, who had a deep bass voice, the legendary voice of M. Prudhomme, and was fond of displaying the depth of his organ. "Then, my dear Freneuse," he continued, "you make investments, since money is owing to you ? It is a good point—a capital one, at your age, to have debtors instead of creditors. I was not mistaken in you. You live well, but this doesn't hinder you from laying something by. It is true you must make large sums. Is it inquisitive to ask how much you make a year ?"

"It would be difficult to state the precise figure," stammered Freneuse, colouring a little.

"Let us see. Come as near it as you can."

"Last year I made sixty-six thousand francs, and if I chose to paint portraits—"

"You would make a great deal more. It must be done, my friend ; it must be done. I don't know a better business at present than yours, and it is growing more and more lucrative. The Americans are beginning to buy, and—"

But the box-opener curtailed M. Paulet's enthusiastic estimates. She approached him cautiously and said : "Some one is here who wishes to see Monsieur Paulet. He brings an important telegram."

"A telegram," he repeated. "I told no one that I was going to the Porte-Saint-Martin this evening, and yet a telegram follows me here."

"Your valet knew, papa," said Mademoiselle Paulet.

"True, I had not thought of that. You will excuse me, my dear Freneuse, for leaving you a moment. Marguerite will talk painting with you better than I." And M. Paulet hastily followed the box-opener, who closed the door after him.

It was the first time in his life that Freneuse had found himself alone with Mademoiselle Paulet. *Tête-à-têtes* in society are rare—a few words exchanged at a piano, in moving the music, in opening a door, or at a table where a young lady pours out a cup of tea for favoured guests with her delicate fingers. So the opportunity afforded by this unforeseen event was an excellent one for breaking through the ordinary trivialities of conversation, and he resolved to profit by it. Mademoiselle Marguerite was doubtless of the same disposition, for it was she who led the conversation to more familiar ground.

"I fear my father shocked you by forcing you to name the amount of your income," she said in her gentlest tone. "You must think no more of it. He has a regard for money which I do not share; but it is for my sake that he has it. He is devoted to me, and fancies that I cannot be happy without a large fortune. I confess that I understand happiness differently. I should not be sorry if my husband were rich; but I prefer that he should please me."

"And I, mademoiselle, should be well consoled for marrying a young girl without a dowry, if I loved her."

"Then our ideas correspond," said Mademoiselle Paulet, gaily. "Let us see if we agree as to the rest of the programme. What is necessary to please you? You are an artist and must have an ideal."

"I have found it," replied Freneuse.

"May I ask where?"

"Do you go sometimes to the museum at the Louvre?"

"Not often. My father only cares for modern paintings. And there are times when I think with him."

"Well, beg him to accompany you to the large gallery, and look at a portrait by Rubens, in the fifth triforium to the left. The master has been dead for two centuries, but his model still lives. You know her, and I need not tell you her name when you have seen this marvellous canvas. You will then know my ideal."

"But if I am not mistaken, Rubens only painted blondes."

"My ideal is blonde."

"That is strange. You paint only brunettes."

"Because brunette models are running the streets, and there is no difficulty in procuring them, whilst blondes are rare, like fine pearls."

"Italy at any rate can furnish but few. Then if I consented to sit to you—"

"I should be too happy, mademoiselle."

"But—it would be necessary to go to your studio every day."

"Your father might consent to accompany you," said Freneuse.

"Oh! he would like nothing better. Only—"

"What?"

"I should like to be sure of not meeting any one—Italian models especially. I have one great defect—I am horribly jealous."

This time it was a declaration, and the artist, conscious of the bearing of this significant language, was about to add emphasis to his own, when M. Paulet suddenly returned.

"My dear friend," he said in some agitation, "you will be kind enough to excuse me; my daughter and I must take leave of you. The telegram I have received announces the death of my brother at three o'clock yesterday."

"Let me assure you, monsieur," said Freneuse, "that I am not insensible to your grief."

"We were not on good terms, and I have no cause to bless his memory, but I must not remain at the theatre, it would be indecent. Come, Marguerite, my valet will fetch a cab, and we will finish our evening at home."

Freneuse, surprised and somewhat disconcerted by this announcement, had risen, and was standing before the door of the box. Mademoiselle Paulet had risen also, and her face, if it did not evince great distress, betrayed considerable agitation. She was evidently much less affected by the loss of an uncle she had never seen, than by the necessity of parting from an agreeable companion. "Remain, my dear friend," said M. Paulet to the artist, who was about to accompany them to their carriage, "you are not in mourning, and may witness the end of the play, which social decorum forbids to us. I assure you, we should much prefer to finish our evening with you." And as Freneuse was about to protest: "Don't insist," resumed the capitalist. "We shall meet again ere long. When I am relieved of the cares which my brother's death will occasion, we will surprise you some day in your studio."

Freneuse replied with a bow. He pressed M. Paulet's hand. Mademoiselle Marguerite proffered hers in turn, and emphasised this graciousness with an encouraging smile.

Freneuse then remained alone, but he had matter for consolation. His affairs were progressing finely. The father had shown the most friendly disposition toward him, and the daughter in a three minutes *tête-à-tête*, had made advances as marked as a young girl's natural reserve would allow of. "This is becoming serious," said the artist to himself. "I begin to believe it will be in my power to possess, ere long, a most adorable wife and a father-in-law, graced with seventy thousand francs income. The question is, are all these blessings worth the sacrifice of my liberty? I do little else than work from morning till night, but I can work according to my fancy, but if I married Mademoiselle Paulet I shall be condemned to paint only blondes. Poor Pia! I must close my door upon her, and she might die of grief. Bah!" he concluded, "I could settle that by sending her back to Subiaco with a nice little sum, which would procure her a good husband in her own country."

While thus reflecting, he put on his hat to go off, for he had no desire to see the end of the "Chevaliers du Brouillard." Few among the spectators had left their seats. In the stalls everybody was seated with the exception of one woman, who was moving toward the exit, endeavouring to make her way to a gentleman who stood at the entrance of the passage, making signs to her. "Ah!" muttered Freneuse, "the business agent and his companion are leaving in the midst of the performance. Why are they in such haste to decamp? Have they observed me in M. Paulet's box? Possibly, for I was standing when the father and daughter took their leave. Then they are afraid of going out at the same time that I do. Well, I shall defeat their calculations, I shall reach the entrance before them. O Binos! what follies do the fancies with which you have filled my brain cause me to commit!"

With this invocation Freneuse darted into the corridor, and without taking time to don the overcoat handed him by the box-opener, descended the staircase, four steps at a time, and took his position to the right, outside the door of exit. In another moment the man and woman appeared arm in arm and paused a moment on the threshold. The man looked one way and the woman the other. "Good!" said Freneuse to himself, "they

dare not set foot outside without assuring themselves that they are not watched. They are afraid of meeting me. Ah ! the lady has lowered her veil, that is a mistake, for now she more strongly recalls the passenger in the omnibus. I don't think she has perceived me. Ah ! there is the orange-woman approaching them."

In fact, the woman had planted herself before them and was addressing them clamorously. "Three sous ! beautiful Valencias !" she cried, barring the way with her basket. "Buy my oranges, my prince ; refresh your lady—they will cost you less than in a shop."

But her importunities met with no success. The man pushed her aside and passed on quickly, leading his companion with him, and the two approached the monumental arch, which has given its name to the theatre. Freneuse then left his ambuscade, and in a second had reached the orange-woman, who welcomed him with : "It's a true proverb, hey ? 'Speak of 'the devil and '—you know. What did I tell you about recognising—'

"The man who rode outside ?" interrupted Freneuse. "It is he—is it not ?"

"Ah ! I answer for it. And the woman he is taking with him looks like the one who got in at the Halle aux Vins. Must have made her acquaintance getting out : he gave her his seat. That's what it means to be polite to ladies. He's stingy, all the same, this gentleman, or he'd have given his lady a taste of my Valencias."

Freneuse was already far off before the woman had ceased speaking. Strong in this confirmation of his suspicions, he darted in pursuit of the pair, determined to track them to their abode, so that he might indicate it to Binos. He soon perceived that his intention was suspected. The woman frequently turned, and the man manoeuvred so as to mingle with the crowd of people coming from the Théâtre de la Renaissance to air themselves during the *entr'acte*. Freneuse succeeded, however, in keeping the pair in sight. They were evidently conscious that he was on their track, for they increased their pace and did not turn again. He saw them walk rapidly round the group of omnibuses stationed near the Porte-Saint-Martin, pass between the theatre and the faubourg, gain the Boulevard Saint-Denis, and approach the long line of cabs against the sidewalk.

"They are going to take a cab," said the artist. "The deuce ! I hadn't thought of that. Well, I shall take one too. I have no intention of quitting them—except in front of the door of their house."

Freneuse was not mistaken. The man and his companion approached a cab and began to parley with the driver. The file of vehicles commenced at the Porte-Saint-Denis, and the cab they chose was the fifth from the last. Freneuse took the last, to avoid attracting their attention. He placed his hand on the door, and made a feint of searching for a cigar, so as to give the pair time to take their seats.

"Where are we going, monsieur ?" asked the driver from his box.

"You see that gentleman and lady, talking with the cabman yonder ? As soon as they set off you will follow them."

"All right. It is by the hour ?"

"Yes, and a good gratuity, if you keep up with them."

"Get in, monsieur, and rely on me not to lose them. I understand this business," said the cabby.

Out of the corner of his eye Freneuse watched the pair who were parleying at a distance, and was surprised that the colloquy lasted so long. "The orange-woman is right : this man is niggardly," he thought, "he is

haggling over the price of a ride. Ah ! he decides to pay in advance ; he assists the woman in and gets in after her. Now's the time to follow their example. They think they have thrown me off the track, and little dream that I am here prepared to give them chase."

"Are you ready, monsieur ? They are stowed away—the driver yonder has climbed on to his box and is moving."

"Go," said Freneuse, "but don't follow too closely ; they must not find out that they are pursued." He then sprang in, and popping his head out of the window had the satisfaction to ascertain that the other cab had left its place in the file and was rolling slowly along the boulevard. "Where are they going ?" he asked himself. "To my neighbourhood, very likely. The man got out last night in the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne, and the woman in the Rue de Laval." However, he was surprised to see the cab turn to the left and follow the Boulevard de Sébastopol. "I was mistaken ; they are going away from Montmartre. But it doesn't matter if their abode is on the left bank of the Seine. I have the whole night before me. Ah ! it wouldn't be quite the same if I were married."

This last reflection recalled Mademoiselle Paulet, as well as the fact that the father of this adorable creature knew the man with the brush-like moustaches. "Dash it !" thought Freneuse, "I can find out the name without giving myself all this trouble. Monsieur Paulet did not recall it at the moment, but he has it in his memorandum-book, and has promised it to me. I have half a mind to relinquish this pursuit, which can teach me nothing more than I can learn from Monsieur Paulet." He raised his hand to turn the knob to stop the vehicle, when other thoughts came into his mind and restrained him. "Yes, Monsieur Paulet will tell me all he knows, but this rascal may have given him a false name. A man of his stamp is very likely to have two lodging-places, and it will be interesting to discover whether the woman who is with him lives with him. Besides, when shall I see Monsieur Paulet ? The death of his brother will keep him busily employed. I sha'n't dare to call upon him for several days, and under present circumstances it would be unseemly to write to him on so trivial a matter. It will be gaining time to finish the chase I have begun."

The respectable vehicle in advance travelled so slowly that Freneuse's driver found it difficult to prevent his horses from passing it. "They are in no hurry," thought the artist, "which proves that they don't know I am following them. What a figure they will cut when they see me alight at the same time as themselves. But shall I alight ? It appears to me it would be useless, for I have no intention to ask for explanations. It is enough for me to know where they live, and as soon as they have returned to their abode, I shall return to mine."

On reaching the Pont au Change, the cab took to the left, along the Quai de la Cité, and soon reached the Pointe Notre-Dame.

"Are they going to the Morgue ?" Freneuse asked himself, as he recognised the municipal edifice where the unrecognised dead are exposed. "But no ; at this hour it is closed. Their cab doesn't stop ; it passes the Pont de l'Archevêché ; evidently they live on the left bank, probably in Pia's neighbourhood, for their cab is now passing along the Quai de la Tournelle."

When it reached the square which terminates the Boulevard Saint-Germain, the driver turned a little to the right, and stopped before the door of a house at the corner of the Boulevard and the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Bernard. Freneuse softly lowered the window of his vehicle, and seated

himself close against the door, so as not to miss the descent. To his great amazement no one appeared. The driver fastened his reins, dismounted from his seat, unbridled his horses, and lighted his pipe with the deliberation of a man who knows he has ample time for a smoke. "What is the meaning of this?" asked Freneuse. "Why don't they come out, now that they have reached their destination? Do they suspect that I am watching them? In that case they would push on and try to throw me off the scent." At the end of five minutes of suspense and uncertainty, the artist heard his driver mutter: "I believe these folks have played my fare a trick, and that the cage is empty."

This reflection was an explanation for Freneuse. He opened the door, sprung on to the sidewalk, and approached the other cab. The windows were raised, and it only needed a glance inside to assure himself that it was empty.

"And your passengers," he said to the driver, "have you spilled them out on the road?"

"My passengers!" he answered. "I'm waiting for them, but I fancy they're not coming. It's all one to me, and when my horses have finished their oats I'm off to the Company's depot. My day's ended, and I have had five francs' gratuity."

"But the gentleman and lady that got in at the Porte-Saint-Martin?"

"Ah! you saw that—and followed all the way! You are nicely fooled. They got in on one side, and out on the other. That was agreed with the gentleman. He gave me ten francs in advance to let his lady and himself pass through, and then drive here, to set you running to the Halle aux Vins, while they were cavaliering on the great boulevards. I see it's no use to stop before this door. They won't be so stupid as to come here."

Freneuse saw the justice of this reasoning. He said nothing, but retired ashamed and dejected at having been so completely outwitted, and vowing that while he lived, he would never again attempt to give chase to knaves.

"Come," he said, as he regained his cab, "every one to his own business. I was no more born to be a detective than Binos was created an artist. But I am now satisfied that this pair were in the omnibus yesterday. If they had not recognised me, they wouldn't have taken such pains to escape me, and if they are afraid of me, it proves that they haven't a clear conscience. Fortunately, I can get their address from Monsieur Paulet, and then we shall see. Place Pigalle, cabby, and drive fast!"

IV.

THE Boulevard Rochechouart is the especial quarter of those dingy smoking and drinking dens in Parisian parlance styled *caboulots*. There are also some respectable cafés and shops where honest working-men may take a drink at the counter, but the above-mentioned establishments are more numerous. These *caboulots* are not exclusively frequented by men of evil repute. Thither come Bohemians, who, though little disposed for work, have never had dealings with the police. Artists also abound in these places, the artists who are not dainty respecting the quality of what they consume, nor choice in the company they keep. It is enough that they can find credit, appear in a blouse, sing at the top of their lungs, and play dominoes all day or all the evening. Our friend Binos had long been familiar with one of these resorts, between the Rue Clignancourt and the Boulevard

Ornano, a few steps from his lodging place in the Rue Myrrha. Here Binos was thoroughly at home ; here he spent twelve hours out of the twenty-four, and made, as the saying goes, fair weather and foul. When it pleased him to hold forth on great art, the *habitués* listened as to an oracle. And here, moreover, he met friends who deemed it an honour to refresh him when he was thirsty ; for he did not consort with everybody, but only with those who had a position—a marble-worker of the Saint-Ouen Cemetery, for whom he designed wonderful tombstones ; an independent gentleman, named Piédouche, who had a respectable air ; a retired druggist, whom deafness prevented from shining in conversation, but who admired artists in general and Binos in particular.

M. Piédouche* was one of the most agreeable of talkers. He was acquainted with many climes and peoples. No one could tell precisely where or how the earlier years of his life had been passed, but he had evidently seen a great deal, and retained a recollection of what he had seen. Binos arrived at the conclusion that this agreeable companion had been attached to the police in some capacity, which enhanced his relish for his society ; for police-business was his hobby, and he never let pass an opportunity to lead the conversation to this interesting topic. But for three days Binos had vainly awaited at the Grand Bock, as the *caboulot* was called, for his chosen companion. He grieved bitterly over this vexatious coincidence, but in response to his oft-repeated inquiries, no one could furnish him with any tidings of Piédouche. It was believed that he resided in the neighbourhood, some said on the Place d'Anvers, others in the Rue de Dunkerque ; but he did not receive his café acquaintances at home, and Binos had been unable to learn his address. His inexplicable absence confirmed the opinion he had formed, that Piédouche was attached to the police. He was doubtless engaged in some secret mission, and would not appear for a certain season ; and his absence was a serious grievance to Binos, who had relied on his penetration, and even co-operation, to unravel the much involved matter which he had boasted his ability to disentangle. He now acknowledged that his vaunting had been premature, and so humiliating was the discovery that he had not ventured to show his face on the Place Pigalle. He was, therefore, permanently established at the Grand Bock, only going out at times on an expedition to the Morgue, to ascertain whether the young girl was still there, and whether any one had recognised her, and always returning from these dismal excursions without having discovered anything new. No one had recognised the deceased, and the term of exhibition established by the regulations would expire on the morning of the third day, when the secret of the crime would be buried with the victim.

The certainty of this approaching *dénouement* dismayed Binos and occasioned him some remorse. He asked himself whether he would not do well to carry the poisoned pin to the commissary of police, and inform him of the scene in the omnibus, despite the repugnance of his friend Freneuse to be connected with the affair. But he greatly preferred to operate himself in conjunction with Piédouche, who, he was satisfied, was worth all the detectives in the world. While Binos was waiting, almost in despair, for the arrival of this personage, Paul Freneuse, who might have furnished him with some valuable hints, remained quietly at home, thinking a good deal more about Mademoiselle Paulet than about the pair he had given chase to.

* The reader should be warned that this M. Piédouche is *not* the personage of the previous story, "The Old Age of Lecoq, the Detective."—[TRANS.]

Towards noon on the third day, Binos was promenading gloomily across his favourite *caboulot*, with his pipe between his lips, and with an anxious brow, ever and anon pressing his face against the panes of the glass door, hoping to see Piédouche appear on the boulevard. It was the hour when he usually presented himself to play billiards or dominoes—but he did not come. The landlord, Father Poivreau, was slumbering at his counter between a bottle of absinthe and an empty glass ; the retired druggist, who answered to the name of Pigache, was reading a newspaper in a corner, deeply absorbed, no doubt, for he did not utter a syllable and was motionless as a log, and Binos, who had failed to touch him by his jeers, since he was deaf, was thinking of rousing him by setting fire to his newspaper with a match, when suddenly the door opened.

"Good day, comrades ! " said a rough voice, which aroused the master of the establishment and made the druggist raise his head.

"Piédouche ! " exclaimed Binos. "At last ! I have been looking for you for three days."

"To offer me a glass of cognac, I warrant," said the illustrious Piédouche, who appeared in high spirits, with a laugh.

"For that first ; but for something else. What has become of you ? Have you been ill ?"

"I ? Never ! Look at me. Have I the appearance of a conscript exempted from service on account of weakness of constitution ?"

"No, *parbleu !* but a man may be solidly built and not beyond a slight indisposition. I, who bear myself like the Pont-Neuf, often have a headache. I observed that you were missing three days in succession and grew uneasy. If I had known your address I should have been to inquire for you."

"Oh, it isn't worth while. I never go home but to sleep, and all that. I went out of town on Tuesday and only returned this morning."

"That explains it. Did you go far ?"

"No ; only fifteen leagues from Paris—on business—a little inheritance that has just come to me."

"My congratulations, old fellow ; that is an accident which never happens to me."

"Bah ! who knows ? Meanwhile it is my treat to-day. Father Poivreau, a decanter and glasses ! Ah ! he has guessed my order. The cognac is already served."

"Of course ! if I had come into an inheritance I should invite all the passers-by ; but I don't want to talk near Father Pigache. I have something to tell you and to consult with you about alone."

"Well, he won't hear ; he is as deaf as a post. Secrets ! confidences This is something new. Are you conspiring against the government ? The dence ! that wouldn't suit me at all."

"Oh ! that I can well believe. A man can't meddle with such things when he belongs to the administration. But it's nothing of that sort—this is a private matter."

"Well, let us have it ; but we will touch glasses first. To your health, papa," said Piédouche, rapping Pigache on the shoulder. "And now for the story."

Binos was leaning on the table, impatient to begin his narrative. He recounted the journey in the omnibus from the moment when an unknown individual relinquished his seat for a veiled woman, down to the catastrophe at the end, giving a glowing description of the three actors in the

drama, the two accomplices and their victim, the scene on passing the Pont-Neuf, and the astonishment of the employés when they discovered the death of their passenger. Nothing was omitted from this affecting description, only he made himself, instead of his friend, a participant in the affair, ascribing to himself the rôle which had been played by Paul Freneuse.

M. Piédouche listened attentively and with marked interest. Two or three times during the narration he smiled, and exclaimed at the conclusion : "Here's an adventure indeed ! and how the deuce did you happen to be in the neighbourhood of the Halle aux Vins at a quarter to midnight ?"

"I had passed the evening looking for a woman who resides in the neighbourhood—a model," stammered Binos, unprepared for this question.

"It is quite interesting, this sudden death ; but what do you wish to consult me about ?"

"I want to know your opinion of this strange catastrophe."

"I have no opinion," said Piédouche, shrugging his shoulders. "I'm no doctor."

"Nor I. Nevertheless, I am persuaded that the girl was murdered in the omnibus."

"By whom and how ?"

In response to this inquiry, Binos entered upon the second part of his narrative—the discovery of the poisoned pin and fragment of a letter, and the experiment which had cost the life of a cat—and concluded by entreating Piédouche to assist him in opening a campaign to discover the abominable pair who had been guilty of this frightful deed. Piédouche had grown serious. He nodded his head assentingly to each observation of Binos's, and quaffed three successive glasses before replying : "Well, I begin to think as you do, that this was no natural death. Have you represented the facts to the commissary of police ?"

"No. It will be time enough to do that when I have found the woman and her accomplice."

"You are right. The commissaries would have gone off on a wild-goose chase ; you would have been suspected. But tell me—I suppose you have kept the poisoned pin and the letter ?"

"You may rest assured of that. I keep them on my heart. Here they are." So saying, Binos drew from one of his pockets a case which usually contained his favourite pipe, and drew from it the incriminating articles.

"An ingenious hiding-place," said Piédouche, laughing.

"You see, I'm afraid of losing them, and still more of pricking myself. But you may examine them, and I even beg that you will do so—only handle the pin with care."

"I shall not handle it at all—that will be safer. I will content myself with trying to decipher what is written on this paper, if you will allow me."

"If I will allow you ! when I have been so impatient to know your opinion. I can see proof of a crime in every line."

While Piédouche unfolded the crumpled paper, Binos, looking up, observed a cunning smile on the face of Father Pigache. He had not been diverted from his paper by the conversation, which he could not hear, but his eyesight was good, and the exhibition of the pin diverted him exceedingly. "Ah, my boy," he said, pointing to it with his finger, "you preserve your lady-love's gew-gaws as relics ? So much for being young. She is pretty, eh, the girl who fastened her hat on with that pin ?"

"Don't touch it !" cried Binos, "it bites !" and for greater safety he closed the case.

"Good ! good ! Don't be jealous, my boy," resumed the deaf man, "these fooleries are not for my age."

"Read your paper, then, and leave us alone."

"I am well preserved, you say ? You flatter me, young man, but I bear you no ill-will," replied Pigache, as he buried himself again in his paper.

"Decidedly, we need give ourselves no concern about him. He is deafer than I supposed, and Father Poivreau is snoring at his counter, so you can tell me your opinion of the letter."

"It proves nothing," muttered Piédouche ; "there is not a single complete sentence."

"No, but one may read between the lines. 'She arrived a month ago.' 'She' is evidently the girl who was pricked in the omnibus. 'I return to my first project'—the project clearly was to kill her with the pin. 'She goes out very little, but sometimes in the evening to—' This is plainly the girl ; the rascal did not know whom she visited, but he knew where—the neighbourhood of the Halle aux Vins—and he watched for her return."

"You are much cleverer than I, my dear friend, for I myself should never have made out all that you tell me. But as to the pin, I can ascertain in what poison it has been steeped. I know a very expert chemist who will analyze it. But you must intrust it to me."

"That is just what I should like to do. You will make no improper use of it, and it will be as safe with you as with me. Take the pin and the case, too—on one condition, however."

"What ?"

"That you agree to work with me. I have sworn to discover the guilty parties, and shall accomplish nothing without you."

"Whence have you derived such an opinion of my talents as a detective ?" asked Piédouche, laughing.

"Well, having gone so far, I may as well say that I fancy you have been engaged in the business."

"You are very flattering—at least, if you are not one of those who have prejudices against the police and the people attached to it."

"I ! If I were not an artist, I should be a detective—that is to say, you understand, not a paid spy, but an amateur detective on my own account and that of my friends, like Monsieur Lecoq in Gaboriau's novels."

"Monsieur Lecoq, if I am not mistaken, belonged to the service."

"And I don't. I have missed my career. But if you were, I should have nothing to say against it."

"However it may have been," said Piédouche, with a smile, "I beg you to believe that I am not one of the police now."

"A reason the more for engaging in my affair, then. If you were attached to the Prefecture, it would embarrass your undertakings ; but, being free, you may direct our researches."

"I see nothing to prevent it ; but, if it leads to any result, what have we gained ?"

"The satisfaction of avenging the death of a poor girl who has been murdered by a pair of villains."

"That is something, I admit. The question is what chance have we of success ? You say the victim has not been recognized at the Morgue ?"

"Unfortunately, no ; and she is to be buried this evening."

"The deuce ! we have no time to lose. If her identity is not ascertained, her murderers can't be found. And I confess I don't see how this is to be done."

"There is but one way—to discover her lodging."

"If you think that is easy—"

"No; but it is not impossible. Read the torn letter again. On the third line there is the Rue *des*, not the Rue *de*."

"True, the plural does give us a starting-point."

"Exactly; and I should have gone through every street with a name in the plural, had I not delayed matters in the hope of seeing you. For these three days I have not left the Grand Bock."

"By consulting the Directory, we shall have a list of the streets in which we are interested, and may then divide our work. There is a method we might pursue which would shorten our researches. The girl took, you say, the last Halle aux Vins omnibus?"

"Yes."

"Then she was returning home, and must have lived in the neighbourhood of the Place Pigalle. Do you know a Rue *des* in that vicinity?"

"Several; the Rue des Martyrs, the Rue des Abbesses—"

"Well, we will inspect these first."

"Hum! the Rue des Martyrs is long—from Notre Dame de Lorette to the heights of Montmartre."

"What!" exclaimed Piédouche, laughing; "you are grumbling already at the work before you."

"No, but I am afraid of losing time."

"Then let us take the Rue des Abbesses first."

"That's near and it's short, so we should do well to begin with it. I say 'we,' because you seem inclined to accompany me, and without your help I shall accomplish nothing. When I have learned the first elements of the business, you will see that I shall prove an expert huntsman."

"I am sure of it," said Piédouche, gravely. "It only requires coolness and penetration. But if you would profit by your apprenticeship, you must gain information for yourself. I shall be on hand to prompt you."

"Capital! let us set out at once."

"I admire this noble ardour, and am entirely at your service. Do you allow me to keep the pin and the letter?"

"If you like. I shall be more at ease when they are in your hands, for I have not an article of furniture that locks, and all my pockets have holes—more or less."

Piédouche shook the landlord till he roused him, paid the score, and went out. Binos followed, and the pair walked side by side to the Place Saint-Pierre, at the foot of the heights of Montmartre. "My dear fellow," said Piédouche, as they entered the Rue d'Orsel, "I fancy the young girl occupied furnished lodgings, from your description of her dress. We will begin with them."

"A good idea!—excellent idea! Ah! you have proper scent—and since you reason so well, tell me why they killed the girl? Not to rob her, surely—only fourteen sous were found on her person."

"What! you haven't guessed? A woman's vengeance, of course. She had ensnared some other woman's husband, or lover."

"Possibly; but she didn't look like a girl to steal other women's husbands."

"I beg your pardon! You said that she was marvellously beautiful."

"Yes, but with the modest, reserved air of a girl who had never left her mother."

"Bah! you shouldn't trust to appearances. Virtuous girls don't go

about at midnight, alone, in omnibuses. However, we will not speculate on that at present. It will be time enough when we know who she is."

"Brigadier, you are right," said Binos.

They walked on rapidly, and had passed the Montmartre theatre, beyond which the Rue des Abbesses begins. Piédouche stopped, and pointing out a door : "My dear fellow," he said, "there is a den of unprepossessing appearance, which, for that very reason, may be worth the trouble of entering."

"With you?" added Binos.

"No, without me," said Piédouche.

"What! you wish me to enter this lodging-house, and question the person who keeps it, alone? The deuce! I shouldn't know what to say! To ask information about a lodger whose name I don't even know!—that's no easy matter."

"You are easily embarrassed. There are several ways of doing it."

"Which would you adopt?"

"The simplest. I should draw from my pocket a pretty five franc piece and exhibit it to the landlord of the establishment—if you have to deal with a concierge a two-franc piece will do—and beg him to tell me if such and such a young girl doesn't lodge there. I wager they won't refuse to answer."

"You could do that better than I, it seems to me."

"No, for I haven't seen the girl, and should give but a poor description of her, whilst you, who have examined her at your leisure, will draw so exact a portrait that it will be recognised at once. Go on, then—what hinders you?"

"Dear me! I may as well confess it—I haven't either the five-franc nor the forty-sou piece about me. I left my purse at home."

"Is that all? Here's mine, then," said Piédouche, drawing a pretty leather purse from his pocket. "It's contents will suffice to loosen the tongue of any of the lodging-house keepers of Montmartre, and I beg you to make free use of it."

Binos hesitated a moment for form's sake, and finally accepted. "It is simply an advance, dear friend, which I shall reimburse some day, and I shall husband your finances. Perhaps I shall obtain the information for thirty sous. But suppose I am told that the person in question lived here, but disappeared three days ago—what must I then do?"

"You will inform yourself adroitly as to her habits—whom she received; will ask whether she left her baggage in her room, or papers; what name she gave—and when you know this you have only to hasten to the Morgue and make your statement to the registrar, who will inform the police. The lodging-house keeper will be summoned, will recognise his lodger—you will then have a base of operations, and may begin a serious inquest."

"With you, I hope?"

"With me if you like. I should not desire to engage in it ostensibly, but I will not spare my advice if you desire it."

"Piédouche, my old friend, we have life and death in our hands!" exclaimed Binos, with enthusiasm. "I shall enter this house—which has not the air of a palace—and make my *début* under your auspices in secret diplomacy;" and he made for the building designated by the sagacious Piédouche, while the latter sauntered up the Rue des Abbesses. The alley gate was open, and Binos went in. "What a man!" he muttered to himself. "If the girl really lodged here, Piédouche would be the greatest

detective of modern times. Upon my word I should be tempted to believe he knew her."

The alley was neither spacious nor well lighted. Binos advanced cautiously, stretching out his arms so as to touch the wall on either side. At length he heard a voice on his left cry out : "What do you want?"

"I wish to speak to the concierge," replied Binos.

"There is no concierge here," said a woman's voice.

"To the landlady, then."

"I am the landlady. Do you want a room?"

"No, I come on account of one of your lodgers."

"Explain yourself ; and come nearer so that I may see you."

Binos would have asked nothing better than to show himself, but he could not see a bit, or tell which way to turn to effect an interview with the person from whom this summons had come. Groping his way, however, his hands at last came in contact with a glass door which stood ajar. Pushing it open, he entered a room to which the dim unwashed glasses of a bull's-eye window sparingly admitted the doubtful daylight of an inner court. He could scarcely distinguish a little old woman warming herself by the dying embers of a coke fire.

"Good ! you can speak now," she exclaimed. "I know who you are."

Binos would have been glad to be able to say as much, for he was completely disconcerted by this reception, and at a loss how to begin. It was impossible to avail himself of Piédouche's suggestion. The exhibition of a five-franc piece could produce no effect, for the reason that the old woman, whom it was to wheedle, would have been unable to see it shining between the fingers of the stranger who questioned her. But Binos did not long remain in embarrassment. If diplomacy was not his forte, timidity was not his failing. "You say you know me," he began boldly. "I will wager you don't."

"If you made a bet you would certainly lose," replied the woman, fixing on him her little grey eyes which shone in the darkness like those of a cat.

"Ah ! then tell me who I am."

"I don't know your name, but I know you make your living by daubing good canvas with bad colours. I have met you fifty times on the Boulevard de Clichy with your box of paints."

"Then I confess it, good mother, and I will paint your portrait whenever you like."

"I have no need of my portrait. It's forty years since I've looked in a glass. And I forbid you to call me 'mother,' as I've got no children—nor husband either, thank God."

"Good ! I will say mademoiselle."

"What is it you want ?"

"To know whether you have in your house a young person who interests me."

"Ah ! here you are ! I guessed you came from her."

"From whom ?" asked Binos, completely nonplussed.

"From the Italian girl, of course—from Bianca."

"Ah ! if you have guessed, it is useless to contradict you," said Binos, who was now quite willing to allow the old woman all the time she needed to proceed.

"It was you, then, that enticed her away, you scamp ! I suspected the little fool had fallen into the hands of miscreants, and a deuced taste she showed. Where was it you talked to her, eh, monster ? Was it at the Saint-Pierre Market, where she went every morning, to buy her dinner ? or,

in the evening, on the Place Pigalle, when she returned from her singing lesson?"

"I swear upon your head that I have not enticed anyone away."

"Be quiet, serpent! For three days she hasn't been back, she who never stayed away o' nights at all. Tell me, if you dare, that you haven't led her into your kennel? It's no use trying to humbug me. But you came for her things, I suppose. Tell her, from me, that if she wants them, she must take the trouble to come and fetch 'em. She hasn't become a princess, I suppose, since she's lived with you."

"Excuse me," stammered Binos, "I have already told you that—"

"Oh, I can well suppose she's not too anxious to see me again, for her conduct is shameful; and if I'd known she was going to end like this, I'd never have had her here."

"But, my good woman—"

"Don't 'good woman' me. My blood curdles to think of it. Ah! the demure looking saint! I warrant she didn't tell you how she came here. It was one night, and it was freezing to a degree that a dog couldn't sleep out of doors, when she arrived here, with a youngster carrying her trunk—a wooden box that could hardly hold two dresses and a few undergarments. 'Madame,' she said, with a droll accent, 'could you let me have a room—cheap? I haven't much money, but will pay by the day.' I saw at once she wasn't one of the gad-abouts that are so plentiful in this neighbourhood. So I asked her if she had any papers. She took out an Italian passport, 'Bianca Astrodi, eighteen years, cantatrice.' *Cantatrice*, indeed! a poor half-starved thing coming on foot from the Lyons station to save a cab—it was as much as if you'd called yourself an artist, you who do nothing but clean palettes and wipe brushes."

"Thank you," growled Binos.

"You are going to declare, perhaps, that you paint pictures that are received at the Exhibition. Well, go and tell that to Bianca; it may suit her, since she already imagines that you will make her happy. When I think that the month she was here a man never entered her room, nor a woman either, and she never went out but to visit a singing teacher who came from her country—and then to fall in love with *your* phiz, indeed! You wheeled her, crying out: 'I'm an artist—we were made for each other—a garret and my heart!'—and she believed it. By heavens! what idiots girls are!"

Binos made a gesture of protestation. But to say the truth he only interrupted the woman sufficiently to incite her to continue, and the system succeeded admirably; for in five minutes' monologue she had told him, without questioning, nearly all he wished to know.

"But I'm wasting my time," resumed the irate landlady at last, "and have something to do besides talking to a bird of your kind. I've had enough of you. Decamp!"

"Not until you have—"

"What is it you want now? Have you effrontry enough to suppose I mean to give you the girl's things? You can tell her from me that if she comes after 'em I will let her take 'em without keeping my six francs rent. She hadn't too much money, poor thing—and now she's got you to support."

"Ah, indeed! I'm good-natured, but I will permit no one—"

"To tell you the truth to your face. It's all the same to me whether you permit it or not. You may tell her, too, that her room is let, and that I wouldn't lodge her again if she paid me twenty francs a day. I want no

foolery in my lodgings ; and that signifies that if ever you're turned out of your kennel, there's no room for you here."

"*Sacre bleu !* I have no desire to become your lodger ; I should prefer to sleep out of doors. And if you would have allowed me to edge in a word, you would know that you are quite wrong. Listen to me. I did not come here without an object."

"No, since you came from her."

"On account of her—yes. But she didn't send me. She is dead."

"Dead !" exclaimed the woman. "Ah ! that's too much !"

"It's true. The young girl whom you call Bianca is dead, and if you don't believe me, you have only to go to the Morgue—she is there."

"At the Morgue !" repeated the woman, rising suddenly. "Impossible!"

"Go and see," replied Binos. "But make haste ; she has been there three days, and is about to be buried."

"For three days !—since she's been away from here ! Then it wasn't you who—"

"I didn't know her. I saw her, for the first time, extended on a marble table."

"Then how did you know she lodged here ?" asked the old woman with a scrutinizing look at Binos.

"I didn't know it. I thought she resided in this neighbourhood, and I decided to visit all the lodging houses. I began with yours and chanced to be right. You told me at once a name that I didn't know."

"Ah ! you belong to the police then, and I have taken you for—"

"For what I am, Jacques Binos, an artist. I went to the Morgue and saw the girl there ; she was so beautiful that I was moved by the sight, and when no one recognised her, I began researches on my own account, and I did quite right—at least, they can now put a name on her certificate of death, and on the wooden cross which I shall place over her grave."

"Her name ! it has yet to be proved that it was my lodger, Bianca Astrodi, who was carried to the Morgue."

"But that is what you will do. You will go and identify her."

"I ? never ! I should be ill ! The idea of setting a body thinking of drowned people and coffins—it makes me shiver."

"I understand that, my dear lady ; but it has to be done. I am immediately going to state the case to the commissary and he will send for you."

"Ah, rascal ! if you serve me such a trick you shall pay for it."

"I can't keep what I know to myself. You yourself wouldn't wish to have Bianca thrown into the common hole with the dead who are dissected at the medical school."

"Hush ; you make me shiver. Ah, dear, dear me ! poor girl ; how did it happen ? She didn't drown herself, I hope—she must have been crushed by a vehicle."

"She was found dead in an omnibus, on the Place Pigalle."

"What ! it was she ! I saw that in the *Petit Journal*—and to think I didn't suspect anything—it was the same day too that she didn't come home—and I thought she was gadding about !"

"Which proves that one may be mistaken. Now, do you still accuse me ?"

"Of having run off with her ? No ; but all the same, the death is suspicious. Bianca was light of weight, but her health was perfect. May-be she was poisoned."

"Perhaps ; but by whom ? You say she saw no one."

"Here—no. But she went out of an evening and sometimes in the day time."

"Where did she go ? That is what we must find out."

"Not from me, then. Bianca was no prattler, and I'm not inquisitive. And that means, that I know nothing at all. She talked about a singing-master who lived near the Jardin des Plantes. It seemed queer, for there are only organ-grinders in that quarter—unless it be to sing in the markets or streets. Once she said she had some relations in Paris, but she didn't know where they lived."

"She came from the Lyons station," murmured Binos to himself ; "strange that she took a lodging at Montmartre."

"Not at all. She didn't know Paris, and an Italian who had been a tenant of mine last year, sent her to me."

"She came then, direct from Italy ?"

"From Milan. It was on the passport."

"You have the passport ?"

"To be sure ; it is in her trunk with her papers, her clothes, and all her odds and ends, which are not much. But it's locked up and she took the key with her."

"The key ! it was found in her pocket with a purse containing a few sous."

"I daresay ! the girl wasn't rich ; but she always locked her trunk when she went out. I might have had it opened by a locksmith when I saw she didn't come ; but I was fond of her, and I wouldn't have sent her off if she'd come back, for you see, my boy, I'm not ill-natured. All the folks hereabouts will tell you that Sophie Cornu has never been hard on her tenants."

"I am sure of it—though you were hard on me a little while ago."

"Because I took you for one of these miscreants who saunter along the Boulevard de Clichy to entrap the young girls they meet. It's not your fault or mine ; but you cut a sorry figure, and I've a notion you're seldom at work."

"A little every day, my dear lady."

"I will believe it, if it gives you satisfaction ; but since it's not you who carried off Bianca I've nothing more to say. And now that I know what has become of the child, she sha'n't be put in the common trench—not if it costs me fifty francs to buy a piece of ground."

"That's talking. I thought you had a heart. Then you will go to the Morgue ?"

"Dear, dear me ! that's little to my fancy."

"It must be done, though, for I cannot take your place. I did not know the girl ; while you, who lodged her, and have all her papers—"

"And if I recognize her—what then ?"

"You will have nothing more to do. The prefect of police will send here for her trunk, and they may, perhaps, discover the relatives you speak of."

"And what good will that do ? They are no more concerned about her than about a lost dog. But if I go out, some one must keep the house, and my maid is at the wash-house. I will get a neighbour to go for her—but I can't shut you up here. So be off, and come to-morrow and go with me to the funeral, if you have a mind."

"You may be sure I have a mind, but it must be on the condition that we divide the expense."

"Divide expense ! Come now ! You haven't a farthing, and I, thank God ! can pay for a pretty funeral. We will talk of it to-morrow ; but de-camp—I have no time to trifl."

Binos asked nothing better than to disappear ; and if he had been lavish of politenesses and munificent offers, it was with a view of conciliating the landlady, who might be needful to his projects. Binos had fully succeeded in his embassy ; he was triumphant ; he conceived himself to be a first-class diplomatist, precisely as some men pride themselves on the game of cards which they have won because they held an excellent hand. He took leave of Sophie Cornu and rushed into the street. Piérouche had arranged a meeting with him in front of the Mairie of Montmartre. Binos raised both hands above his head, in token that he was the bearer of good tidings, and in his delight nearly tossed his hat in the air.

"Well ?" asked Piérouche.

"Your indications were exact, and I declare that you are a great man. The girl has lived there ever since she came to Paris—that is, for a month past—and the old woman who keeps the lodging-house is preparing to go to the Morgue to identify her. She told me the name of the deceased, and—"

"She has her papers ?"

"Papers, clothes, and everything are in the trunk, and will be handed over to the commissary as soon as her identity is proved."

"Have you told her your opinion of the death in the omnibus—does she know that the girl was murdered ?"

"She has no suspicion of it," replied Binos. "I am more cunning than you would think ; and I saw directly that if I spoke of a crime she would back out of the affair through fear of compromising herself, whereas, by letting her suppose that her tenant died a natural death she would not hesitate to go and identify her."

"My best compliments, my dear fellow," said Piérouche ; "you have manœuvred like an old stager. You are quite as long-headed as I am, and I think you can dispense with my aid."

"Oh, no !" exclaimed Binos ; "without you I should commit nothing but blunders. I am at a loss now where to begin—except by going and telling everything to the commissary of police."

"The commissary would take you for a fool," replied Piérouche quickly. "Police functionaries are not carried away by fancies, and you know nothing positive. The woman told you that the girl received no one, so you have no ground for suspecting anybody."

"She said the girls had relatives in Paris, and that she went out every evening to take a singing-lesson."

"Relatives in Paris—that is very vague. And the singing-lesson may have been only a pretext. Whereabouts did her professor reside ?"

"The old woman did not know exactly."

"Well, that is the first thing to be ascertained."

"She said, however, that he lived somewhere near the Jardin des Plantes, and only you in all the world are capable of finding him."

"I will try and perhaps I may succeed, but these researches take time. It was a miracle that we fell at once upon her lodging-place, a miracle that is not likely to repeat itself."

"The deuce ! but they are going to proceed with the interment, and when that is done, how can it be proved that the girl was poisoned by a puncture ?"

" My learned friend can determine that point when he examines the pin. If he states that the poison leaves no traces, nothing can be done either now or hereafter. If it does leave any, however, there will still be time to inquire into the matter. And I shall then have collected moral proofs which will be valuable. The first point is to ascertain who was interested in getting rid of the young girl. And if I undertake this campaign, it must be on conditions that you speak of me to no one. I fear you have already talked. During the three days that you were looking for me, you did not keep this story to yourself, I warrant."

"I swear, Piédouche, that—"

"Do not swear. I read in your eyes that you have spoken to some one. Tell me who it was?"

"*Ma foi!* One can conceal nothing from you. Yes, I made a confidant; but he is a serious young man who will be silent, I am sure, for the adventure did not interest him, and he thinks no more about it. He is occupied with other matters, and besides he does not believe in a crime. It is Paul Fréneuse, the artist."

"Oh, I know him by reputation and by sight. Did you tell him that you were counting upon my aid?"

"No, he does not know that you exist, and I give you my word of honour not to pronounce your name before him—he will think I am working alone."

The wary Piédouche reflected for an instant. His countenance, which had clouded over upon the confession Binos had made respecting his indiscretion, soon recovered its serenity, and after a short pause he said: "I have your word, and relying upon it, I am willing to take your affair in hand. Keep quiet and come to-morrow to the Grand Bock. Perhaps I shall have news for you. And now we must part."

"I obey, illustrious master," said Binos, gaily pressing the hand offered him by Piédouche, who quickly turned and walked towards the outer boulevard.

V.

WHILST the enterprising Binos and the sagacious Piédouche were engaged in the work of discovering the name and abode of the unfortunate deceased, the capitalist Paulet was engrossed with other cares than searching for the perpetrator of the crime of the omnibus; and that for several reasons, the first being that he was altogether unacquainted with the matter. He read little except financial journals, and when he glanced over a political sheet, he passed by the general news items disdainfully. He plumed himself upon being a serious man, solely concerned with serious matters. It was his boast never to have read a romance, and if latterly his mind had allowed itself to dwell upon art and artists, it was because he had arrived at the certainty, that in our era the artistic career is when successfully pursued one of the most remunerative vocations. But it was not without a conflict that he had made this admission. He had passed his whole life in contempt of daubers, "starving fools," as he called them, or spendthrifts destined to die on the straw; but a friend who had amassed a fortune by the sale of his curiosities, antiquities and pictures, had proved to him by facts and figures, that fashionable artists made immense sums of money, and sometimes even became millionaires. "Their business is a safe one," he added, "and they are sure not to become bankrupt." This last argument had great weight with M. Paulet, who would not for the world have exposed his

daughter's fortune to the risk of being wrecked in a commercial disaster. And he found ready at hand a young artist whose paintings already brought good prices, who was industrious, economical, steady, of good appearance, good breeding, good standing in society, in fact a phoenix among sons-in-law, and who, besides all this, pleased his daughter Mademoiselle Marguerite.

So M. Paulet had cast his eye upon Paul Freneuse, and only awaited the opportunity which must shortly occur to make direct overtures to him. He would, perhaps, have given the conversation this decisive turn at the theatre, had it not been interrupted by an incident which had since brought many anxious nights to fair Marguerite's father. The telegram which announced that his brother had just died disinheriting him, was framed after the usual manner of telegrams—that is, with such an economy of words as to be barely intelligible. M. Paulet had immediately telegraphed to ask for further explanations, and his correspondent, who had been his brother's notary had replied laconically : "I set out to-morrow for Paris." M. Paulet impatiently awaited the arrival of this notary who had always defended his interests, and who, it might be supposed, would not have undertaken this long journey of two hundred and fifty leagues without some good cause. His sole object was surely not to place in the brother's hands a copy of the instrument which despoiled him. So the capitalist spent three days alternating between hope and discouragement. He valued his repose almost as much as his wealth, and this suspense and uncertainty deprived him of appetite and sleep.

His daughter's attempt to remind him that Paul Freneuse expected a visit from them at his studio, met with so cold a response—even a downright refusal to stir from the house until after the interview with this notary, who might be looked for at any moment—that Marguerite, forced to relinquish her efforts at persuasion, consoled herself by trying on various mourning toilets which greatly became her. M. Paulet remained in his study, employing his time in re-perusing the old correspondence which had passed between his brother and himself before their positive rupture, and anxious to discover whether these letters, which were written from Italy, contained any hint of the marriage which he suspected the deceased had contracted. However, he could find nothing conclusive. The question was, had the defunct had any legitimate or natural children ? and, in that case, what had become of these children ? On the fourth day, after a melancholy breakfast, from which Marguerite had absented herself on the pretext of a headache, the disinherited father had just taken his seat before his desk, when a servant announced that a gentleman wished to see him.

"What is his name ?" asked M. Paulet. And, upon being told that the visitor did not wish to give it: "I only receive the persons whom I know," he added.

"This person says he wishes to speak to monsieur on important business."

"Oh ! oh !" said M. Paulet to himself, "it is perhaps the notary. These provincials are so ignorant of Parisian customs. This fellow imagines that every one may enter here just as he enters his own office, and has deemed it superfluous to send me his card. Very well, ask him in," he said aloud, as he rose to receive the impatiently expected guest.

The next moment the door opened and admitted a visitor who was plainly neither notary nor provincial. "What ! it is you ?" said the capitalist, knitting his brow. "I enjoined upon you not to return unless you could bring certainties instead of vague probabilities."

"I have acted according to your orders, monsieur," replied the new comer.
"I bring you certainties."

"We will see. But first tell me your name, which I have quite forgotten."

"Blanchelaine, monsieur—Auguste Blanchelaine."

"Yes, I remember. And you live near the Saint-Honoré market."

"No, 74 Rue de la Soudière."

"I must have your address somewhere, but it has escaped my memory. Some one asked for it recently, but I was unable to give it; it would be as well for you to leave me your card."

"I haven't one with me; but if you would be kind enough to give me the address of this person—"

"Presently, when you have told me your news. And first of all I will observe that you bowed to me recently across the theatre, and that I have not authorised such liberties."

"You had not forbidden them," rejoined M. Blanchelaine, coldly.

"Possibly; but I beg that it may not be repeated. Now let me hear what you have to say. How do your researches progress?"

"They are ended."

"How is that?"

"I have the proof that Bartolomea Astrodi had a daughter named Bianca, born in 1862."

"In 1862!" repeated M. Paulet, whose face clouded perceptibly.

"Yes, monsieur, on the 24th of December. I have been able to procure a certificate of baptism."

"Show it to me," said M. Paulet, quickly.

"I haven't it with me, but will place it in your hands when the time arrives."

"You know the contents at least. Was this Bartolomea Astrodi married?"

"No, monsieur. Her daughter Bianca is designated as the child of an unknown father."

"Ah!" said M. Paulet, drawing a long breath of relief. "And what has become of the girl? She has disappeared, no doubt."

"She left her mother when ten or twelve years' old, and at the commencement of the present winter, she was singing at the theatre of La Scala at Milan."

"And—she is there still?"

"No, monsieur; she came to Paris a month ago,"

"To Paris! What was her object in coming here?"

"To search for her father, who was a Frenchman."

"Come!" exclaimed the capitalist, visibly agitated. "This is a romance of your own invention."

"No, it is true, monsieur; I am perfectly informed, believe me, so much so that I can give you the name of this Frenchman. He was called François Boyer. The child was born at Rome where he resided. He now inhabits the department of the Eastern Pyrenees."

"That is no affair of yours," said M. Paulet, bluntly. "I did not charge you with obtaining information respecting the father."

"No; but I don't transact business in a half-way manner. In seeking for information of the daughter, I wished to ascertain why she left her country, and I know it."

"How do you know?"

"That, monsieur, is my secret. If I revealed to my employers the mechanism of my profession, they would have no further need of me. However, I know it, and shall prove it to you—and I know many things besides."

"What do you know besides?" asked M. Paulet, assuming an air of indifference.

"Monsieur," said Auguste Blanchelaine, "I might confine myself to rendering an account of the mission with which I was charged—that of gaining information respecting the child of Bartolomea Astrodi born twenty years ago in Rome. This information I bring and am ready to support by authentic proof; I may therefore claim the remuneration due for my work."

"I do not refuse it."

"I am sure of that, but my services would not be estimated at their just value if I stopped there, and the time has come to play an open game with you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I am not ignorant why you wish to know what has become of the daughter of Bartolomea Astrodi. This daughter, Bianca Astrodi, is simply your niece."

"It is false! I have no niece."

"Oh, she is your niece only by the left hand, and Monsieur Francois Boyer was only your half brother. You are none the less his natural heir for the portion of his estate which is derived from your mother; and this portion is well worth an effort to obtain."

"That being granted, the existence of this daughter is a matter of small concern to me, for you have just said she has not been acknowledged, and in that case can have no right of inheritance."

"Not a legal right to claim it. But you are aware, monsieur, that nothing could hinder Monsieur Boyer from leaving his property to the first-comer; for instance to the Signora Bianca Astrodi. It is even a fortunate circumstance for the girl that she has not been recognised, as in that case, according to our code, it would have been out of his power to leave her the whole of his fortune."

"Had my brother designed making a foreigner his heir, he would have sought her out. He has for years made no attempt to see her."

"He may have lost sight of her, and yet not forgotten her."

"He would at least have evinced a desire to see her—would in some way have manifested his intentions."

"He has done so. It is not his fault if he did not again see his daughter."

"You are better informed than I, it would appear," said M. Paulet, with some ill humour.

"As I had the honour to state, it is my custom to thoroughly elucidate the business matters intrusted to me. I have, therefore, had a correspondent at Amélie-les-Bains."

"Ah, this is too much! You have undertaken to act the spy. And you pretend that you are to be paid for this interference with affairs that did not concern you?"

"I claim nothing. I wish merely to present you the facts; it is for you to draw your conclusions."

"To the deuce with your 'conclusions,'" exclaimed M. Paulet angrily. "I have no further use for you. My brother has recently died."

"I knew it."

"You knew it?"

"Yes, since yesterday. And I know, too, that you have been disinherited in favour of Bianca Astrodi."

"You will tell me also, perhaps, that you have seen the will?"

"No more than you have. But the notary must have written to you."

"However that may be, I have no further use for you."

"On the contrary, my services are more than ever needful. What would you give me, if I brought you news of Bianca Astrodi's death?"

"You told me but a moment ago that she was in Paris."

"Eh! but one may die in Paris as elsewhere."

"And you have the proof of it?"

"I have, and am prepared to furnish it—not gratuitously you understand."

"I should not be so stupid as to pay for it when I can obtain it without your aid."

"Try."

"I need only examine the registers of deaths at the different mairies of Paris."

"You are free to do so. The dead are not always inscribed under their real names."

"If this Astrodi has been registered under a false name, how can you furnish a certificate which will establish her decease?"

"That is my affair."

"And if you could, how would it benefit me? If this Italian girl has inherited, her heirs will inherit from her."

"Assuredly. But on what day did Monsieur François Boyer die?"

"On Wednesday, at three o'clock."

"Then, if Bianca Astrodi died on Tuesday, what would be the state of the case?"

"The situation would not be altered."

"I thought you understood your code better. To inherit from a person, you must survive that person, must you not?"

"Certainly."

"Then, a will made in favour of a deceased party, is—lapsed, as the term is, is it not?"

"Evidently, but—"

"It becomes as though it had not existed. The inheritance reverts in its entirety to the natural heirs."

"You are sure of that?"

"Absolutely. If you doubt me consult your notary, or any lawyer."

"So that, if the girl died a day before my brother—"

"A day or an hour, it matters nothing. The question is simply one of date, and to determine it, the two certificates of death must be produced. You already have that of Monsieur François Boyer. It is for you to say whether you wish to procure that of Bianca Astrodi."

"And you propose to sell it to me?"

"Yes."

"You are engaging in a singular business?"

"A man must do what he can. If I were a gentleman of means like yourself, I should not engage in selling inheritances. But it is as good a trade as any; and you will have no reason to complain of it if you are indebted to me for a handsome fortune, which will cost you proportionately but a moderate sum. I will remind you that it was you who sought me."

"I beg pardon. I heard of you as a person who contracted to discover parties, in which line of work you had proved yourself skilful. So I commissioned you to obtain information respecting a certain Bartolomea Astrodi, but I said nothing to you of an inheritance."

"Agreed. But I should have been an idiot not to have guessed it. I began by informing myself as to what inheritances might revert to you in the future, and it proved no very difficult task to establish your situation and that of your brother."

"Had I known you would proceed in this way, I should not have applied to you."

"It may please you to say so now, but you will allow me to think the contrary, and to remind you of a certain conversation in which I inquired what I should do in case I established the fact that Bartolomea Astrodi had a child. You exclaimed that if such a child existed, it was to be hoped it would die."

"You do not mean to assert, I trust, that I ordered you to kill it?"

"Fie!" said Auguste Blanchelaine, shrugging his shoulders. "Does a man like yourself give such orders to his agents? He confines himself to expressing a wish. You said—I repeat your very words—'Whoever shall assure me of the death of the Italian girl, will bring me good news.' I remember very well, also, that I replied: 'Good news costs dear; to which you responded: 'I should not look at the price.'"

"You have an extraordinary memory, monsieur," growled M. Paulet, in evident agitation; "and a person should be careful as to the expressions he employs in conversing with you."

"He must be cautious what he writes, also. I won't conceal from you that I have carefully preserved a letter, signed by you, and containing certain instructions. According to this letter I must, in case Bartolomea Astrodi should have left a child, ascertain what has become of it, and when I have done so, use every effort to prevent her from coming to France; and if it chanced she had already done so, and was here still, she must be prevented from remaining."

"I meant by any allowable means," said M. Paulet, quickly. "If I did not use the word, it is because it was understood. I am an honest man, and honest men don't have recourse to such methods."

"I grant it; but it is none the less true that you gave me *carte blanche* to rid you of a person who inconvenienced you."

"To rid me,' is not the word. You choose strange language."

"I choose what best expresses my meaning."

"But I require you to explain your meaning. One might suppose you had killed the girl and wished to make me your accomplice."

"You go too far," said Blanchelaine. "I beg you to believe that I have killed no one. I only wish to prove to you that I have not acted without orders and that I have worked on your behalf. I had no personal interest in the disappearance of Bartolomea Astrodi's daughter."

"Disappearance? You make use of doubtful terms."

"How doubtful? A person who dies, disappears."

"How did she die?"

"If I told you, you might dispense with my services and I don't wish that. The pains I have taken entitle me to a fitting reward. I have conducted two or three inquiries at once during the past month, and have terminated them all successfully. An inquiry concerning Bartolomea Astrodi, concerning Bianca, and also Monsieur François Boyer, your half brother."

"Oh, for that, I owe you no thanks," said M. Paulet.

"I don't ask for thanks, I content myself with proposing that you should buy the certificate of Bianca Astrodi's death."

"I understand you, and after due consideration, I refuse."

"You are at liberty to do so, my dear sir. But would it be inquisitive to ask the reason of this refusal?"

"Not at all. I refuse because the certificate is of no use to me."

"You mean that you can procure it without me?"

"No; I do not even propose to try."

"Then you relinquish your brother's inheritance? That is disinterestedness, indeed."

"Excuse me. The legatee is dead, is she not?"

"Dead and buried."

"Then she will not come forward to claim the inheritance?"

"No; but should you claim your share, it will not be surrendered to you. The will is in the hands of the presiding judge of the district court, and I can answer for it, the natural heirs will not obtain possession while the death of Bianco Astrodi has not been certified by an authentic document. A trustee will be appointed to administer the estate, until the appearance of the legatee or of the certificate of her decease. You may say that in thirty years it must revert to you by the statute of limitations. No, not to you, to your grandchildren; for in all probability you will not be alive, and even your daughter may—"

"Enough!" exclaimed M. Paulet. "What do you require for putting me in possession of this certificate?"

"Good!" exclaimed Blanchelaine, "you are growing reasonable and we shall soon come to an understanding, for my terms are moderate."

"Name them," said M. Paulet, ill-humouredly.

"Willingly. Your brother left about twelve hundred thousand francs."

"Not so much as that."

"I am sure I come within fifty thousand francs. My information is obtained from a reliable source."

"At all events, I can claim only half."

"I know it. The other half reverts to the heirs on the paternal side. I will observe, by the way, that these heirs are as interested as yourself in establishing the death of the legatee. You might, by treating with them, recover a portion of your disbursements; it would only be fair that they should reimburse you for half the commission you pay to me."

"Perhaps," muttered M. Paulet, evidently impressed by this suggestion; "but let us pass on—name your sum."

"I might exact an equal division, but will content myself with a fifth—say a hundred thousand francs. You see I make a minimum calculation, for your brother leaves you nearer six hundred than five hundred thousand francs."

"A hundred thousand francs! You have the audacity to ask me for a hundred thousand francs! I will relinquish the whole affair sooner than pay you that amount."

"As you please, monsieur," replied Blanchelaine coldly. "I shall lose my trouble, and you will lose your fortune." On hearing this, M. Paulet made an angry gesture and began pacing up and down his study. "I have no intention of trying to convince you of your mistake," resumed the agent. "I would ask you, however, to reflect before you come to a final decision; for if I leave your office without coming to an agreement with you, I warn you that I shall not set foot in it again. I like business which is concluded

promptly, and I have no time to waste. This evening the person with whom I have been occupied on your behalf will be erased from my list, and should you call on me to-morrow I shall not be at home."

"But you don't, I suppose, expect to receive this hundred thousand francs to-day?"

"No, for I have not a copy of the certificate of death with me. You will hand the sum to me when I bring it to you, or rather—you see how honest I am—when you have come into possession of your inheritance."

"Upon this basis we might agree, if—'

"But I require a written engagement."

"What, you are distrustful of me!"

"Not at all, but business is business. No one can say who will live or who will die. I should be bothered to have to apply to Mademoiselle Paulet to execute an agreement which she had not concluded."

"I must know what is to be the form of this agreement which is foreign to all custom."

"It is sufficient that it should have no illegal character. You will merely declare, in an engagement made on stamped paper, that as compensation for certain work, undertaken by your order, you owe me the sum of a hundred thousand francs, payable the day you enter into possession of your brother's fortune. There is nothing immoral in that. But I have a condition to annex which you will not, I am sure, hesitate to accept, and for which I will content myself with a verbal promise."

"What is it?"

"I ask you to give me your word of honour to speak of our engagements to no one."

"Oh, if that is all, have no fears, I have no desire to boast of them."

"Without boasting of them, you might mention them to one of your friends, the one, for instance, who asked you for my address."

"He is little concerned about all this," said M. Paulet. "My affairs don't interest him, and I have no desire to confide them to him."

"I believe it, but I wish certainty."

"You don't wish me to sign an engagement to that effect on stamped paper?"

"I have said that your word of honour would suffice."

"Well, then, you have it."

"I accept and I rely on it. Now may I venture to ask the name of your friend—the one who wished my address? I should like to make his acquaintance. No doubt he needs my services, and as I live by my profession, I naturally seek to increase the number of my clients."

"I will send the gentleman to you—he wishes to find a debtor."

"That is my specialty, and I will use my best efforts if your friend is good enough to employ my services. He is a merchant, no doubt?"

"No, an artist."

"An artist! Oh, then I know who he is. You were with him at the Porte-Saint-Martin. It is Paul Freneuse."

"Ah!" said M. Paulet, in surprise. "Then you have relations with him?"

"No, but I have often met him in the street and at theatres. His face is not quickly forgotten. He has considerable abilities, and a reputation equal to his talent. I should gladly place myself at his disposal if my services could be of any use to him, but you will particularly oblige me by not sending him to me."

"Why?"

"Because I don't believe he has any serious intention of employing me. An artist as a creditor is rare, and an artist who pursues a debtor is unheard of. The idea may have entered Freneuse's mind, but I warrant it has not settled there, or, if it has, that he will abandon it. And as I have no time to lose, I prefer not to engage in an affair to find my services abruptly dispensed with some fine morning. So I beg, that if he still asks for my address, you will say you have forgotten it."

"Be it so, then; I promise not to give it to him; but you did well to warn me in time, for I shall probably see him shortly. But to return to more important matters. When will you bring me the certificate?"

"To-morrow, or the next day at the latest—that is, if you sign to-day the engagement which guarantees my right to a commission." And, seeing that M. Paulet still evinced reluctance to take up the pen to bind himself, Blanchelaine added: "What do you fear? The settlement which I propose leaves nothing uncertain. No misunderstanding is possible. We have interests in common which can easily be arranged when our object is attained, and the happy moment is not far off. Two days hence you will be in a position to establish that Monsieur François Boyer's legatee was already dead at the time of his demise, and before a month has passed you will be in possession of your share of the inheritance."

This agreeable perspective, so opportunely held out, decided M. Paulet. He sat down at his desk, opened a drawer, took from it a large sheet of paper bearing the usual fiscal stamp, and drew up a contract in the terms specified by Blanchelaine, who, after examining it carefully, placed it in his pocket-book with evident satisfaction. "Now, monsieur," said this dealer in inheritances, "it is as though you were worth half a million more, and I a hundred thousand francs, which will count far more in my modest fortune than the half million in yours. It now only remains for me to take leave of you, and to beg you to give orders to your servants to receive me when I call. I hope to place the certificate in your hands on the day after to-morrow before noon. It will then be for you to act."

"Very well. I shall expect you," murmured M. Paulet.

He showed his agent to the door, and was returning thoughtfully to his desk, when a light rustle made him raise his head. His daughter had partly opened a door which communicated with the drawing-room, and was standing on the threshold.

"May I come in?" asked the beautiful Marguerite, smiling.

"Yes, I am alone," replied M. Paulet.

"For ten seconds only. I thought the gentleman would never go."

"You knew, then, that some one was with me?"

"I was coming to see you and heard voices as I was about to enter, so I waited."

"I hope, at least, that you did not listen at the door."

"Not exactly, but I have good ears and you spoke so loud."

"And you understood what we were talking about?"

"Not much. I only caught a name that was spoken."

"What name?" asked the father quickly.

"The name of Paul Freneuse. What did this gentleman have to say about him?"

"You are very inquisitive."

"I am sure it is not a secret."

"You are mistaken. I was talking of matters that do not concern you."

" You have business matters then with Monsieur Freneuse ? "

" Marguerite, you worry me. Tell me what you want and go."

" I want to ask whether the seclusion that has been imposed on me for four days will never come to an end."

" Seclusion ! have I put padlocks on the door of your room ? Are you not as free in your actions as you have always been ? "

" Well, I know I am not under arrest like an insubordinate soldier. I may go and come from one room to another, sit at the window and watch the passers-by in the Rue de la Ferme-des-Mathurins—where they are few enough—and if this recreative spectacle is not sufficient I can walk with my governess, Miss Belsy, in the Champs-Elysées and eat cakes at the English pastry-shop in the Rue de Rivoli."

" What more do you want ? " asked M. Paulet, shrugging his shoulders. " Do you expect me to give dinners or accompany you to the theatre when we are in full mourning ? "

" Oh, I don't ask you to go into society. I have conformed to custom. You see I am dressed in black from head to foot. But I don't think we are debarred from going to see our friends. At the Porte-Saint-Martin, the other evening, you promised Monsieur Paul Freneuse to visit his studio."

" Ah ! ah ! that is what you are after, you cunning little minx. You would have done better to tell me at once frankly what it was you were dying for."

" Then you see no objection ? "

" Objection ? No, not exactly. I like the young man very well. He has not the usual defects of artists ; if he had, I should not receive him, and as I told him we should call on him, we will go, one of these days."

" Why not now ? "

" Because I am every moment expecting the notary who prepared my brother's will."

" What ! he is coming to Paris ! I thought M. Boyer had disinherited you."

" It was his intention, but an event intervened which—it would take too long to explain it, and besides, you don't understand business ; so be content to know that all goes well. I shall leave you a pretty fortune and you will not lose your uncle's, as I at first feared. You will be richer than I had hoped my little Marguerite, " said M. Paulet, rubbing his hands.

" So much the better. I may marry to please myself then. I shall have enough for two."

" Good ! I understand. That signifies that you have taken it into your head to marry Monsieur Paul Freneuse."

Marguerite coloured a little, but was not disconcerted. " Well, suppose I have, you have not forbidden me to think of Monsieur Freneuse."

" Of course not, " replied M. Paulet. " You might even add that in according him the welcome I have, I allow it to be understood that it would not displease me to grant him your hand if he came to ask for it."

" He will, papa."

" How do you happen to be so well informed ? Ah, I see, I left you tête-à-tête with him at the theatre, and he profited by my absence to declare his sentiments. He would have done better to apply to me first, but these artists always conceive themselves authorised to act differently from other people."

" But I assure you, papa, that Monsieur Freneuse made me no declaration whatever."

"Then how do you know his intentions?"

"I should not be a woman if I had not guessed them."

"And you have encouraged them?"

"Encouraged? No; but I have not discouraged them."

"Then you love him?"

"I like him," said Marguerite, dropping her eyes.

"How astonishing you young women are! One no sooner speaks to you of marriage than you think yourselves called upon to put on silly airs, and not a sensible word can be drawn from you. Speak plainly, do you love Freneuse or not?"

"I don't know."

"It is impossible you should not understand your own sentiments. In a word, would you be glad to marry him?"

"Yes. Of all the men you have introduced to me he is the only one I would accept as a husband."

"Good! that is plain talking. You have chosen this young man without consulting me, but I have no fault to find with your choice. I have studied him, and I believe he will suit you. He inherited no fortune, but he is making money, and has the good sense not to spend all he earns. Economy in a young man is a guarantee of steadiness. I am sure he would make you happy."

"It is not money that brings happiness," murmured Marguerite.

"Possibly, but it greatly contributes to it," replied her father. "That question is settled; with your dowry and his income you will be rich. He is handsome, witty, and well behaved. It only remains to know whether his personal qualities suit you."

"And I am as ignorant of his qualities as he of mine. A man does not exhibit his defects in society. I should like to know my future husband well, and observe his every-day life."

"The deuce! if you think that is an easy matter—"

"There is a way in which it might be done."

"I should like to know it."

"You forgot that Monsieur Freneuse has offered to paint my portrait. That is not done in a day."

"Well?"

"Well, if I were to sit for it in his studio, I should see what took place there."

"But," said M. Paulet, "I suppose nothing occurs in Monsieur Paul Freneuse's studio that is not quite proper. If I thought the contrary I should close my door upon the young man at once. Have you heard that he leads a disorderly life there?"

"No," said Marguerite; "but I know that he receives models."

"Naturally. As an artist, he cannot do without them."

"At present, for instance, he is engaged in completing the portrait of a young girl."

"Yes; tending a goat. He has chosen a droll subject. Why not a keeper of geese? These artists have strange fancies—but what is that to you?"

"This Italian girl is said to be marvellously beautiful. Monsieur Freneuse spoke of her with enthusiastic admiration."

"Good! And you fancy he is in love with this creature?"

"I don't say that, but I am curious to see her."

"You are not proposing, I hope, to make her acquaintance. These

damsels who hire themselves out in studios are little to be commended, and if Freneuse undertakes your portrait I should like to make sure that he will so arrange matters that you won't meet his shepherdess."

"I agree with you, papa. But that proves nothing—"

"Ah ! you are jealous. I didn't know that was your failing."

"I had no occasion to exhibit it when all men alike were indifferent to me."

"And now it is otherwise. I have nothing to say against it, since I propose to make him my son-in-law. But your jealousy is premature. Wait at least till you are married."

"It is not usual, I know, for a young girl to concern herself about the life led by the man she is about to marry ; but I wish to know it, and I maintain that I am right."

"Perhaps so, but I am curious to know how you hope to accomplish your object. You would have to be a little bird to watch a man without being perceived—and little birds, even, are not admitted to artists' studios. Do you fancy you will know what to think about Freneuse's habits, when you have gone with me to his studio ?"

"Perhaps ; I have good eyes and might see things that would escape you. For instance if we find the Italian girl there, I shall know immediately whether he only values her as a model."

"I can answer for that. These street-walkers in red petticoats can't please a man with any good taste. And artists are less easily entrapped than simple citizens. They have seen so many."

"I should like to make sure of it. And I must know whether the goatherdless is as beautiful as he says."

"But he will take good care not to have her there when we go to see him, and he will be quite right too."

"That is precisely why I wished to surprise him. He knows you have lost your brother, and won't expect a visit from you. The weather is superb. It is an excellent day for painting, and he won't lose a good opportunity to advance with his picture, for he is behindhand, and the show opens on the first of May. And this is the hour for the sitting, so I am sure his model is there. If you agree to it, we will take a walk and end it by chance on the Place Pigalle."

"And knock without ceremony at the studio door ? It would be a doubtful experiment. First, he might not open it, and he would be right, not having been notified. I believe artists don't open to any one when they have a model, for fear of disarranging the pose."

"When we reach the door, I will speak out loud ; he will recognise my voice and condescend to lay aside his brush and receive us. You see I am quite ready—I have only to put on my hat and cloak—and you have not been out for three days. The fresh air will do you good."

"Ta ! ta ! ta !" said M. Paulet ; "and the notary whom I expect every moment ?"

"The notary ?" repeated Marguerite, contemptuously.

"Yes," said M. Paulet ; "he is to bring me a copy of my brother's will, and I am impatient to see him. Telegrams are so laconic."

"If he were in Paris to-day he would have been here already. Trains arrive only at morning and night, and as he has not yet appeared, there is no reason to expect him to-day."

"Express trains—but I should not be surprised if he took a parliamentary for economy's sake. Down in the provinces they are ignorant of the British maxim : 'Time is money.'"

"And to put the maxim in practice, I am going to get ready. If the gentleman makes his appearance during your absence, your valet will come and fetch you; you have only to give him your orders and Monsieur Freneuse's address."

"It is a good idea—in that way I can absent myself for an hour."

"And even two," said Mademoiselle Marguerite to herself.

"But under what pretext shall we come unawares upon Freneuse?"

"We need no pretext. He has several times invited us to look at his picture."

"But when a man invites visitors he likes to be prepared for them. Freneuse will not be pleased to show us a studio in disorder."

"But my object is to surprise him."

"Then some explanation must be given, and as you cannot give the true reason—"

"You will tell him that you come for my portrait. He has promised to begin it whenever I wished."

"Hum! This is serious—very serious," said M. Paulet, shaking his head.

"In what respect is it serious?"

"You don't reflect that to accept this proposal is nearly the same as to pledge your hand to him."

"Why? It is his business to paint portraits. I saw one of his last year at the show—it was a lady's, and a masterpiece, too."

"It is likely he was paid for it—and well, too. Do you think he would receive pay for yours?"

"No, I think not."

"Then it is just as if you received from him a present of some ten thousand francs—and a young girl can only accept presents from her betrothed with propriety."

"Well, if I don't marry Monsieur Freneuse you will buy my portrait, and thus be relieved of all obligation."

"He would refuse to sell it—you have just said so yourself—and your face would remain hanging upon the walls of his studio. A pretty thing that would be!"

"He wouldn't put that affront upon me, I'm sure. I hope, too, that I shall see nothing to turn me from a project which—"

"Which you cherish, confess it, and which I approve of. I hope it also, but one never knows what may happen. The moment, too, is an ill-chosen one to ask for your portrait; if he undertakes it, he cannot finish the painting he is engaged on for the Exhibition."

"That is precisely what I wish."

"So then he must send away the Italian girl. I see you are infatuated with this youth. Well, go and put on your bonnet, while I give orders to François."

Marguerite did not need to be told twice. She had foreseen that she would gain her point, and her maid was waiting to give the finishing touch to her toilet. Ten minutes later, M. Paulet and his daughter were walking arm-in-arm in the direction of the Place Pigalle.

VI.

SINCE witnessing the performance of the "Chevaliers du Brouillard," Paul Freneuse had lived like a hermit, or what amounted to the same thing, like

an artist who is behindhand with a picture for an approaching exhibition. The first day had been one of difficulty. His chase after the omnibus couple and his discomfiture still lingered in his mind. He thought, too, a trifle more than was reasonable about Mademoiselle Paulet, and the image of the beautiful Marguerite, evoked by his artistic imagination, frequently interposed between his eyes and the canvas. But the passion of his art soon regained the ascendancy, the recollection of his cab excursion vanished, the seductive phantom disappeared, and his mind became wholly engrossed in the task of achieving a masterpiece. The moment seemed propitious. M. Paulet was not likely to carry out his project of visiting the studio for some time, and Binos, who usually passed his life lounging there and smoking interminable pipes, had for some time not sauntered in. Binos had indeed become invisible, and Freneuse concluded that he had pitched his tent at the Grand Bock, or some other hospitable *caboulot*, or was amusing himself by running after the perpetrator of the crime in the omnibus. He would return, no doubt, when he had news to relate, or when his credit was exhausted in all the cafés where he had been drinking on "tick." Meanwhile, Paul had no regrets for his absence, since he was an insufferable companion for a laborious artist.

Pia posed with exemplary assiduity and perseverance, arriving before noon and remaining till nightfall. She never asked permission to rest, and only at Freneuse's solicitation consented to rise from her stool after a long and fatiguing sitting. In former days she had been less quiet, and had profited by interruptions to relax her limbs and loosen her tongue, making voyages of discovery through the studio, raising the sketches which Freneuse had turned to the wall, making exclamations of delight when she recognized the model, and asking intelligent questions, and chirping like a bird. But for some days past the girl's mood was strangely altered. When she quitted the posture required for the painting, she took her seat dejectedly on a low ottoman, and remained there silent and motionless, her elbows on her knees and her chin supported by her hands.

Freneuse at first took little note of this, absorbed as he was in his work, but on the third day he remarked that her eyes were red, and inquired the cause of her grief. The child replied that she regretted Mirza, whose tragic fate she had learned ; but Freneuse refused to believe she was grieving like this for the hapless Angora. However, as there was no time to lose he was forced to relinquish the task of bringing her to confession, but he resolved to question her more closely when his picture was completed.

Unfortunately, on the fifth sitting after the cat's death, he found it necessary to remonstrate with her, "Little one," he sighed, looking at her attentively, "this will not do at all. You at this moment represent the Virgin at the Tomb of Christ, or Magdalén in the Desert, but not a shepherdess of Subiaco. Did you have this funereal face while you were tending your goats ?"

"At Subiaco," said the child, so low as to be scarcely heard, "I had no grief."

"And what grief have you here ? Heart-aches ?"

"You know I haven't," whispered Pia.

"Good ; you told me you had no lover, and I believe you. You are too discreet to be smitten with any of the pifferari you meet at Father Lorenzo's, or on the Place Pigalle. What is the trouble, then ?"

"Nothing, Monsieur Paul."

"Don't tell me that ; I can read your face like an open book, and you

are not the same girl you once were. You laugh no more, you let your arms hang down as if you were posing for a statue of grief, and if you continue crying my picture will be spoiled. My goat girl will look like the daughter of a brigand, whose father has just been shot. There is only one way to set it all right again. Tell me your trouble. It will lighten it, and perhaps I can find a remedy. Let us see. Has Father Lorenzo been annoying you?"

"No, he is almost respectful to me since you recommended me to him."

"Well, I shall give him a pretty gratuity the next time I see him, and shall go to see him for the express purpose. Are you in want of money, then?"

"Oh, no, I make twice as much as I can spend."

"Are you homesick? Are you pining for your mountains?"

"I have no one there now," murmured the girl.

"True," said Freneuse feelingly. "You are an orphan."

"My mother died last year."

"And you have never known your father?"

"I saw him when I was quite a child, but I don't remember him."

"He was a Frenchman, was he not?"

"I have heard so. My mother never spoke of him."

"And you had no other relatives?"

"A sister. I thought you knew that."

"Yes, I remember, you told me she left Subiaco at the age of twelve. She was older than you."

"I was nine when she was twelve."

"And your mother gave her up?"

"My mother was too poor to support her."

"Hum! my compatriot was very heartless to abandon his wife and daughters in this manner."

"I made my living tending goats," resumed Pia. "My sister was more delicate and could not have endured poverty. She had a good voice, and a singing master offered to teach her music, and place her in an opera troupe. So she followed him."

"And you have heard nothing more about her?"

"She wrote every year to a man at Subiaco, who gave us tidings of her. My mother couldn't read."

"Well, what has become of this sister—does she make her way on the stage?"

"She sung in several large cities in Italy. Last autumn she was at Milan and sung at La Scala."

"As a prima donna?"

"No, in the chorus."

"The deuce! then she cannot be a millionaire. How did you learn that, having left Subiaco?"

"She had found out that our mother was dead, and that Father Lorenzo had brought me to Paris. Everybody at home knows Lorenzo, and where he lives. Six weeks ago I had a letter from my sister, addressed to the Rue des Fossés Saint-Berhard; it was the first time any one ever wrote me a letter. And then another came, which said she was coming to Paris."

"Ah! and she came?"

"Yes, a month ago."

"How is it little one, that you never told me?"

"My sister forbade me to speak about her. She didn't wish any one to know she was here."

"But you have seen her?"

"It is because I don't see her any more that I grieve," said Pia, melting into tears.

"You don't see her any more! You have quarrelled, then?"

"Quarrelled! Oh, no; we love each other dearly—like two sisters who are alone in the world."

"Then why have you ceased to see each other?"

"Because she doesn't come any more."

"What hinders you from going to her?"

"I don't know where she lives."

"Indeed! your sister comes to Paris expressly to see you, and doesn't give you her address! Why, she might have lived with you."

"No, Father Lorenzo's house did not suit her. They respect me there, for am but a child; my sister is eighteen, and she is very beautiful."

"And do you fancy you are ugly? But I can well conceive she did not care to take up her abode in the caravansary of the Rue des Fossés Saint-Bernard. That was no reason, however, for not telling you where she lived."

"She had a reason, which she did not tell me, and which I did not ask. I only know that she refused to receive any one."

"But she went to see you?"

"Yes, every evening. She knew that I sat for you during the day."

"You spoke to her of me then?"

"Oh, very often."

"And what did she talk to you about?"

"About our mother, our childhood, and our country."

"And she regretted her country?"

"Yes, she said her dearest wish was to return and live there with me."

"She would have abandoned the stage then?"

"Gladly. The profession of singer no longer pleased her."

"And would you gladly give up posing?"

"I don't know," the girl murmured, dropping her eyes

"It must be given up, you know, sooner or later. You cannot pass your life in studios. You will marry some day—"

"I don't wish to marry," said Pia, quickly.

"You will change your mind. To return to your sister. She must at least have told you why she came to Paris. It was not to appear on the boards, I suppose?"

"Oh, no."

"Why, then?"

"She made me promise to tell no one."

"The deuce! It was a great secret then! And she forbade you to tell me?"

"She did not mention you. She did not know you allowed me to talk during the sitting."

"Or that I was your friend. But if she had known it, she would have made an exception in my favour. She did not wish Father Lorenzo to know her affairs; but I am not Father Lorenzo, and I am sure she would have judged me worthy of your confidence. You ought to have brought her here."

"I should not have dared."

"But now that you are anxious to know what has become of her, you might tell me what she came to France for. It would assist me, perhaps, in finding her. You are not distrustful of me, I hope?"

"Oh, no."

"Then speak. I have nearly guessed your secret. Your sister was looking for some one, was she not?"

"You are right."

"When I know whom, I shall institute a search. I know a great many people, and if she had applied to me, I might have been able to give her some useful information."

"You promise to tell no one?"

"Whom could I tell? Of all my friends, there is only Binos who knows you, and I have no wish to take him for my confidant. He is too much of a babbler and would be of no use to me."

"My sister was looking for our father."

"Your father!" repeated Freneuse in astonishment. "Ah, true, he was French. But you said you could scarcely remember him."

"But my sister remembered him. She is three years older than I. I have only a faint recollection of going to see him every day in Rome, at an old house on a square not nearly so large as the Place Pigalle, but opposite an immense flight of steps, on the top of which there was a church with towers."

"Ah, I know! The Piazza d'Espagna, on which the Trinita del Monte stands. And suddenly you ceased to see him?"

"Yes; he returned to France, and we went back to Subiaco. My mother might have continued to earn her livelihood by posing, for she was so beautiful, but she did not wish to; she carried us back to the mountains."

"And what did you live on?"

"She had laid by a little money—a very little."

"And your father left her nothing?"

"No—nothing."

"It is abominable!"

"My sister thinks it was because he was poor."

"He had something, at all events, since he went from France to Italy to study painting. If he was not able to settle a fortune on you he need not, at least, have left you in absolute poverty. Had you even a shelter?"

"My mother rented a cottage in the village, that had been occupied by some shepherds. She washed clothes in the stream for some rich families, and my sister and I tended goats."

"And you never heard from your father?"

"No. Once the priest told my mother he had written from France to ask if we were still at Subiaco. But she begged him to reply that we had left the country. We don't know whether he complied."

"Then the poor woman wished to hear no more of him. He must have offended her mortally."

"She never said anything unkind about him. I never heard her mention his name."

"But you know it?"

"My sister knows it."

"And she hasn't told you?"

"I didn't ask her."

"All this is very extraordinary, but the question now is to recover your sister. What day did she cease visiting you?"

"Last Wednesday. I was expecting her, but she did not come."

"And you had seen her the day before?"

"Yes, Monsieur Paul; she had stayed later than usual and said she would return next day."

"How did she come?"

"On foot, I am sure, and returned the same way. She wasn't rich."

"And probably she did not live far. Did your sister wear the costume of Subiaco?"

"No, Monsieur Paul. Since she has sung on the stage she has dressed in French fashion."

Freneuse was continuing his inquiry into the habits of the missing sister, when a singular noise attracted his attention—a gentle scratching on the door accompanied by plaintive mewing.

"Ah, dear me! there's Mirza!" exclaimed the girl.

"Mirza!" repeated Freneuse. "Come, you know she is dead."

"It is a cat, though," murmured the girl. "Listen! it is scratching on the door." A second mewing, more piteous than the first, made her start. "The poor creature is perishing with hunger," she resumed. "May I let her in?"

"Well! yes. If it is not the ghost of my Angora, it is a new pet that comes to us. It is tiresome here without any dumb animals. I was on the point of buying a monkey or a parrot, but since Providence sends me another cat—"

Pia was already at the door, but she had no sooner opened it than she started back with a cry of surprise, almost of fright. Binos stood before her, his hat on the back of his head, his hands in his pockets, and a pipe in his mouth.

"What, you!" exclaimed Freneuse. "What is the meaning of this trick?"

"My dear fellow," replied the miscreant quietly as he glided into the studio, "I suspected that you bore me no good will, and had I rapped as usual, you would have recognised my manner, and have declined to open the door to me. However, as nature has endowed me with a capacity for imitating animals, I counterfeited the tone of Mirza. Wasn't it well done?"

"You should be ashamed to revive the memory of your victim."

"I was forced to do it!" said Binos, gesticulating like an actor on the stage. "And it has succeeded, since here I am; and now that I am here I shall remain. Good day, little one; how pretty you are this morning!"

Pia did not reply to the compliment. She returned sadly to her stool and resumed her attitude, as an intimation to Freneuse that she did not wish to speak of her sister before the visitor.

"I ought to turn you out," grumbled Frenuese, whom this surreptitious entrance had put in a bad humour. "For four days you have been stranded on the benches of a tavern, and you came back here now because your credit is exhausted. I shall tolerate you only on condition that you don't open your lips. I want to have a talk with Pia before going to work, and I forbid you to join in our conversation." Pia sent him a glance of entreaty, which he understood. "Fear nothing," he added to her, "I shall not place your secret at the discretion of this scoundrel of a Binos, but I have still a question or two to ask. This is Monday, five days since the disappearance. Do you think any accident could have befallen your sister?"

"Alas! yes—Paris is so dangerous, especially of nights; I fancy frightful things. She might have been crushed by a carriage or murdered. I have

thought more than once of going to the Morgue, but I did not dare ; I dreaded so much that I might find her there."

"The Morgue ? That is a place that knows me well," said Binos, who was filling his pipe in a corner.

"Silence there ! " exclaimed Freneuse.

"I am not speaking to you, I'm talking to myself. Do you undertake to forbid me a soliloquy ?"

"I forbid everything. Sleep off your absinthe, and leave us in peace," and he resumed in a lower voice to Pia : "Listen, little one ; I will do all I can to find her. In this city a person does not disappear like among your mountains without leaving any trace. It is only necessary to describe her to the police, and they will institute a search, which will result in something, you may be sure of it. A foreigner, on arriving must take a lodging, and the landlord must inscribe the name on a register, which the police may examine when they please."

"Her name was Bianca," murmured the girl.

"Her Christian name, but the other ?"

"Was the same as mine."

"Yes, you both bore your mother's name ; you told me what it was but I have forgotten, but I must know it if I am to start an inquiry. What is it ?"

"Astrodi," replied Pia.

She had spoken low, but Binos had quick ears. "Astrodi !" he exclaimed ; "who wants news of a person named Astrodi. I can give it."

"I told you to leave us alone," cried Freneuse.

"Very well, I'm silent. But you are wrong to forbid me speaking ; I could tell you something interesting."

"About what ?"

"The person Pia has just named."

"You were listening then ! I was wrong to let you come in, and you will do me the favour to decamp."

"I was not listening, and did not hear a word you said ; but she raised her voice at the end of your talk, and as my ears were not stopped up, I caught a name that I know."

"What do you know about that name ?"

"What is that to you ? I have my secret too, and shall keep it. Resume your conversation, my dear friend, and if I utter another word, I wish all the academicians may die instantly."

"But I wish you to tell me what you know about a person named Astrodi."

"Nothing."

"It is false. You have just said you could tell something. If you do not explain yourself, I shall ask you to go off, and never come here again."

"Seriously."

"Seriously. On my word of honour."

"Then I will confess—in your interest. You would grieve over the estrangement, and I should not like your existence to be embittered by remorse. You wish for information about a person named Astrodi. I will tell you in the first place that you have known her."

"I? You are mad !"

"Not at all ; you saw her only once, but you passed an hour with her—near her, I should say."

"Where ?"

"You do not at all suspect?"

"Not in the least."

"Come, you have a short memory. How did you spend last Tuesday evening?"

"Tuesday?" murmured Freneuse.

"I will come to your help. You were on your way home when you saw me through the window of a café—which you deigned to enter."

"Upon getting out of the omnibus?" asked Freneuse greatly agitated.

"Precisely; and it was in this omnibus you met the signora you are inquiring about."

"What! The young girl—that—it was—"

"That young girl's name was Bianca Astrodi, and I venture to assert that it is a discovery that does me infinite honour, as it is due to my perseverance and sagacity."

"How did you ascertain that was her name?"

"I found her lodging place; it was near here in the Rue des Abbesses, Montmartre. I talked with the landlady, who gave me exact information, and promised to see the corpse and identify it. Her name is Sophie Cornu, and she is a good-hearted woman, for she paid the expenses of the funeral, which took place this very morning. We were chief mourners."

"Hush!"

It was too late. Pia had heard and understood. She rose and advanced a step towards Binos, who was at a loss to understand the effect produced by his words. "My sister is dead!" she murmured, and she fell senseless on to the floor.

"Wretch! see what you have done!" exclaimed Freneuse.

"Could I know that she was an Astrodi as well?" said Binos. "I only knew her Christian name of Pia," and he hastened to assist his friend in raising her. Between them they placed her on her feet, but she had lost consciousness, and Freneuse found it necessary to lift her in his arms and place her on a divan.

"Her sister!" he murmured, abstractedly. "I ought to have suspected it after hearing her story. The young girl disappeared on Tuesday evening—the very evening of my adventure in the omnibus."

"I too might have suspected it," said Binos. "The deceased girl resembled Pia in every feature. Why didn't I think of it before. The age, the Italian type too; but I never suspected that Pia had a sister. The child is very mysterious."

"Hush, animal! hand me the vial of English salts from the table there."

"Here it is," cried Binos. "Support her while I hold it. It won't take long; the contents of this flagon would arouse the dead."

Pia's beautiful head was resting on Paul's shoulder; her hair, unbound, fell over her pale cheeks; her eyes were closed, and a faint breath barely issued from her slightly parted lips. "See what you have done," said Freneuse, as he knelt down and applied the salts to the unconscious girl's nostrils. "You have killed her!"

"Oh, no; she will revive presently, and I shall try to comfort her. Who the deuce could have supposed she was so impressionable? It is not usually an Italian failing. I knew one who lost her husband in the morning, and posed as a Bacchante at noon."

"Enough; I forgive your stupid blunder, but you must not tell Pia how her sister died."

"Have no fear. I will invent a story, and to win her pardon I will take

her to the spot where we laid her sister this morning. I'm stumped, through having purchased a crown of immortelles and a large bunch of Parma violets."

While talking, Binos performed with his vial of salts, but to little purpose. Pia shivered convulsively, but did not recover consciousness. At the most critical moment there came a ring at the bell.

"Give me the flagon and open the door," said Freneuse, ill-humouredly. "If I don't open they will begin again. But when you have seen who it is, do me the favour to shut the door in the face of the fool who comes here to interrupt me."

"If you had any creditors I should think it was one. It was a peremptory ring."

Pia had heard the bell, and in her nervous state had thrown an arm around her friend's neck, drawing him towards her till his lips touched her brow. Binos half opened the door and popped his head out. He had a phrase prepared which would put the intruder to flight, for he had a vast repertory of impertinences at his command, and the commission with which he was charged was one it gave him great pleasure to execute. But the words died away on his lips when he perceived a young girl of dazzling beauty with a gentleman at her side. Binos professed a worship for the king of colour, and it was a true Rubens that appeared before his eyes. The impression was so vivid that, in his enthusiasm, he opened the door wide instead of closing it. "Freneuse may say what he chooses," he muttered, "but I cannot leave a masterpiece standing on the landing." At the same moment he doffed his felt hat and bowed to the ground, retreating a few steps to make way for the triumphant beauty, who entered deliberately, not honouring him with a single glance. The gentleman followed more hesitatingly, and Binos assumed the attitude of a soldier who moves aside to permit his superior to pass. Frenecuse at the same time uttered an exclamation which caused Pia to open her eyes.

The divan on which she was half reclining, with her head on Freneuse's shoulder and one arm round his neck, was directly opposite the door, below the large square window which lighted the studio, and under the eyes of the persons who entered. M. Paulet had stopped short on perceiving this graceful tableau, and muttered a few unintelligible words. His daughter, too, although much less intimidated, hesitated to advance. Her brow contracted, and the colour deepened on her cheeks. Binos had quietly closed the door and stood in rapt contemplation of this scene, which rejoiced his artistic heart. But for Paul Freneuse the situation was cruelly awkward and ridiculous. He could not push aside the girl who was tightly clasping his neck, and walk forward to make a correct bow to Mademoiselle Marguerite. And, in fact, he did not know what to do. However, Pia relieved him from his embarrassment. She recovered consciousness and tore herself from his arms, readjusted her dress, bound up her hair, and rose pale and trembling, looking fixedly at the beautiful stranger who was eyeing her disdainfully.

"I am sorry to disturb you," said M. Paulet at length. "If I had known, be assured, my dear sir, I should not have entered."

"I should have greatly regretted to be deprived of your visit," replied Freneuse, "and I beg you to pardon me. This young girl who is my model was taken ill during the sitting."

"And you succoured her; it was very natural. But we inconvenience you by remaining, and will take our leave."

"Oh, monsieur," exclaimed Binos, "you won't be so cruel. If the lady retired with you, it would be as if the sun were extinguished."

The rascal had placed himself in front of Marguerite and was gazing at her with an air of bewilderment. The performance was not displeasing to her apparently, for she smiled, but Freneuse was infuriated. "The little one is on her feet," resumed Binos. "A little repose on this sofa and all will be right again, will it not, *carissima?*" he added, addressing the weeping girl.

"No, I am going," she said, wiping away her tears.

"You are right. The fresh air will restore you altogether. Take a turn on the Place Pigalle and come back when you feel equal to resuming the pose."

"I shall not return," murmured Pia, as she walked unsteadily towards the door.

Freneuse hastened after her to retain her, but Mademoiselle Marguerite stopped him with a look, an imperious glance, which was detected by Pia. Her pale cheeks flushed, and her sweet face contracted painfully, but she did not stop.

This time Freneuse passed before Mademoiselle Paulet and approached Pia as she placed her hand on the door-knob. "Go home, my dear Pia, and take courage," he said. "I shall come to see you to-day, and tomorrow we will go to the cemetery and carry some flowers there."

"Good-bye," replied the girl, repressing a sob.

"I am truly sorry," said Marguerite's father. "You wished, no doubt, to accompany the girl."

"She would not have allowed it," answered Binos. "She had made up her mind to go alone, and she has an iron will. Besides, she is not ill, only grieved."

"What is her grief?" asked Mademoiselle Marguerite, drily.

"She has just heard of the death of her sister."

"Was it here that she heard of it?"

"Yes, mademoiselle," Binos hastily rejoined. "I had never heard of this sister of hers, and I was about to tell my friend Freneuse that I had witnessed the burial of a young girl whom I did not know, except that I had seen her body at the Morgue. I only knew her name, and was so imprudent as to mention that the unfortunate creature was named Astrodi."

"Astrodi! The girl you speak of was named Astrodi?" exclaimed M. Paulet.

"Yes; Bianca Astrodi," replied Binos, surprised by the effect his words had produced on his questioner.

"And you have the proof of her death?"

"The material proof. She has just been buried, and I was present."

"Then a certificate of her decease may be obtained?"

"Assuredly. Yesterday it would have been difficult, as no one knew her name, though she had been lying at the Morgue for three days."

"She died, then, by accident?"

"Yes, monsieur, by a very singular—"

"Could you tell me where she lived?"

This question, unexpectedly propounded, had the effect of arresting Binos's revelation. He had little affection for philistines, as he designated all who had not the honour of being artists, and held himself on his guard in their presence. Now, he had immediately recognised that M. Paulet was a philistine of the first class, and if he had not already set it down to

his discredit, it was owing to the fascinating influence of Mademoiselle Marguerite's luxuriant beauty. But he was little disposed to put him in possession of the tragic omnibus story, concerning which the illustrious Piédouche had sworn him to secrecy. "I don't know," he said; "but if you very much wish to find out, you might inform yourself at the prefecture of police."

Freneuse had been on thorns since Pia's departure. He would have liked to explain how it had happened, that he had been forced to take the Italian girl in his arms, but he felt that to try to justify himself without having been questioned would be as much as to say, "I know you are jealous, and must prove to you that your jealousy is unfounded."

But the beautiful Marguerite was not wont to disguise her impressions, and she approached the subject without hesitation. "The girl is pretty," she said, in a careless tone. "Does she come for a sitting every day?"

"Since I have begun my picture, yes," said the artist, with his accustomed sincerity.

"That is to say for four months, if I mistake not."

"Four months and a half, mademoiselle."

"I can understand that your progress would be slow if such interruptions are of frequent occurrence."

"It has not happened before, mademoiselle. Usually the child preserves her attitude admirably, but just before you entered she received these sad tidings, in consequence of which she fainted. I had to carry her to the divan."

"It was very natural. You must be interested in her, seeing her for several hours every day. And she seems to be much attached to you. I saw tears in her eyes when she said: 'I am going.'"

"She was weeping for the loss of her sister."

"What! Bianca Astrodi, the sister of this model!" exclaimed M. Paulet.

"Yes, monsieur. Did I not tell you so?"

It had been an agreeable surprise to M. Paulet to learn through Binos that Blanchelaine had spoken the truth. There could not be two Bianca Astrodi's in Paris, and her death was a cause of inward rejoicing to worthy M. Paulet. He had even begun to ask himself whether he might not be relieved of his contract. Why should he pay for a certificate of death which he could easily procure for himself? But his joy was damped when he learned that the deceased had a sister. Who was the father of this unexpected sister? This had become the question upon which he required enlightenment. "Pia's name is Astrodi, too," resumed Freneuse. "It was their mother's name."

"It is all right," thought the natural heir of the late M. Francois Boyer. "My brother has never spoken of this second daughter, so she is not his. And as he survived Bianca one day, the model has no claim to the inheritance."

"But, papa," said Mademoiselle Marguerite, "we did not come here to establish the relationship of these two Astrodis, and since you forget to do so, I will remind Monsieur Freneuse that he has promised to show us the curiosities of his studio. As yet I have seen only an Italian girl in a red petticoat stretched out on a sofa."

The hard, unfeeling tone in which Mademoiselle Paulet spoke of a poor girl who had not deserved her disdain gave something of a shock to the very decided inclination which Freneuse had conceived for her. The beautiful

Marguerite displayed more assurance than sensibility, and if she deigned to let it be seen that Freneuse pleased her, she did not shrink from wounding him by her manner of speaking about a child who interested him. The artist had a kind heart, and the mental comparisons which he drew were not to the advantage of the rich heiress. Nevertheless for her beauty's sake, he excused her caprices. "I fear, Mademoiselle," he said, "that in the hope of attracting you, I have over vaunted the marvels of my studio. I have only some sketches, studies, a few antiquities collected in Italy, and fragments of ancient tapestry."

"But your pictures," exclaimed M. Paulet, "we came expressly to admire them."

"My pictures cannot lay any claim to your admiration," said Freneuse, modestly, "but I should be happy to show them to you. Unfortunately, I cannot keep them here—for the reason that I sell them."

"And well, too; for which you deserve congratulation," said M. Paulet. "If I had a son, he should be an artist; it is the king of trades. You have a fortune at the end of your fingers."

"Bah!" said Binos, "there are incidental expenses. Paints are exorbitantly high. I, monsieur, whom you see before you, have been ruined by Vandyke brown and yellow ochre."

"Ah! monsieur is an artist?"

"I flatter myself that I am. I was born to it. I have had no master. I am nature's pupil. Introduce me, Paul."

"Pierre Binos, my schoolmate and friend," said Freneuse, who would willingly have dispensed with this inconvenient comrade.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, monsieur," said M. Paulet gravely. "Do you paint portraits?"

"I paint everything—except sign-boards—and if I were entreated to do so, rather than refuse to assist an unfortunate tradesman, I would dishonour my brush. But were I called to the honour of immortalising the features of mademoiselle, I should execute a masterpiece."

Mademoiselle rewarded this grotesque compliment with a smile. "You have one picture at least," she said, addressing Freneuse, "the one you are finishing for the exhibition. Are we forbidden to see that?"

"Certainly not," replied the artist, "and if it have the good fortune to please you, mademoiselle, it would little matter if the hanging committee rejected it."

The father and daughter placed themselves in front of the canvass, and the former exclaimed: "Ah! the Italian girl who has lost her sister; you have caught the likeness well."

"I think it flatters," said Mademoiselle Paulet. "She has beautiful eyes, but the lower part of her face lacks delicacy, and if I might venture to say what I think, the race which furnishes models is lacking in distinction."

"That is what I tell Freneuse every day," exclaimed the facetious Binos, "but they persist in swamping us with Italian girls, expressly born for exportation. If Rubens had wanted to paint a goatherdess at the tomb of Cecilia Metella, he would have chosen a beautiful Fleming and the citadel of Anvers for a tombstone. Ah, my dear Paul! if mademoiselle would consent to sit in Pia's place you would make a real picture, a picture which would bear the stamp of great originality."

"But supposing I should consent," said Mademoiselle Paulet, "Monsieur Freneuse would not agree to efface the figure of this young girl from his

canvass. He selected it because it pleased him." Freneuse felt that a cherished project hung upon his reply. Mademoiselle Paulet was looking at him with eyes which plainly said: "If you wish to marry me, you may well sacrifice for me a picture and an Italian model." Not that she meant to allow herself to be painted, according to Binos' ridiculous fancy, as a peasant girl of the Abruzzi, but she wished to subject her future husband to a proof. It was the woman, not the model, that displeased her—it was poor Pia, whose incontestable beauty contrasted well with her own.

"You are insane," said M. Paulet. "Our friend, Freneuse, cannot miss the exhibition to satisfy a caprice of yours."

"If Mademoiselle Marguerite would allow me to paint her portrait I should be the happiest of men," said Freneuse, hoping to extricate himself from the dilemma by an evasive reply.

"And I, certainly, the happiest of women," replied the lofty Marguerite, drily; "but I should always reproach myself for having deprived that girl of the immortality you were about to bestow on her."

"I assure you, mademoiselle, I do not presume to hope that my works will survive me, any more than Pia hopes that her features will be handed down to posterity. The girl works for her livelihood, and I do the same, after all, since I sell my pictures. But I love my art, and if you would consent to serve me as a model, I am confident of making a beautiful picture. It is inspiration which is most often wanting to us artists who are compelled to live by our talent. For the sake of profits we choose subjects which please the purchasing public. Italian scenes can be set forth to advantage. I have painted a young Italian girl tending goats, as I should have painted a Transterverine kneeling before a Madonna. But if I could paint the picture I dream of, it is then that inspiration would come to me, and I should paint for myself."

"And for me too," added Mademoiselle Marguerite, who had recovered her serenity on hearing this declaration barely disguised under the form of a confession of faith. "I give you warning that if I decide to sit for you I shall not leave my picture with you."

"I should be delighted to present you with it," said Freneuse eagerly, "but I shall not promise not to preserve a copy."

"The question is, shall I sit. My father asserts that you would do yourself injustice to abandon a nearly completed picture."

"But I may finish it and paint your portrait at the same time," said Freneuse, who perfectly divined Mademoiselle Paulet's object.

"That is to say you would divide your time and studio between me and Mademoiselle Pia. The peasant girl would sit in one corner and I in the other, each in our turn. I thank you, monsieur, for your good intentions, but you will allow me to decline this ingenious arrangement."

This was said in so dry a tone that the artist reddened. "I do not propose that, mademoiselle," he said coldly. "I understand that you cannot give me sittings here where I am compelled to receive persons you would not care to meet, but if your father would authorize me to work at his house—"

"Certainly," exclaimed M. Paulet, "with pleasure."

"You do not mean it, papa," interrupted Marguerite, "the light in our rooms is execrable for painting. Besides, I should want to begin to-morrow, and Monsieur Freneuse has promised to accompany this girl to the cemetery. The promise is sacred, and I must not interfere with it."

"I could not have the heart to break it," said Freneuse looking straight

at Mademoiselle Paulet. "My sympathies are always with the weak and unprotected."

"It is generous on your part," said the lofty Marguerite, with irony, "but generosity may sometimes cost one dear."

"Marguerite, you go too far," said M. Paulet. "Monsieur Freneuse is free to dispose of his time as he pleases. To bring matters to a compromise, I propose that—"

This attempt at pacification was interrupted by a loud ring at the bell. Binos had listened to this war of words without interruption, inwardly siding with Mademoiselle Paulet, whom he viewed with the eye of a connoisseur, and deemed superb in her attitude of an enraged lioness. He resolved to lecture Freneuse, and represent to him the folly he was guilty of in quarrelling with so beautiful a woman and this substantial philistine for the sake of a little model. So he seized on the occasion to curtail the dispute by opening the door without waiting for permission.

The person who had rung was a freshly shaven gentleman with a white cravat and black clothes. Binos, whose head was filled with the crime of the omnibus, took him for a commissary of police, and, after bowing down to the ground, entered into a conversation with him on the subject of judicial inquiries.

"Excuse me, monsieur," said the new-comer. "I came from the country to see Monsieur Paulet. I was told he was to be found at Monsieur Paul Freneuse's, and took the liberty—"

"Here I am," ejaculated M. Paulet, making for the door.

"Monsieur," resumed the visitor, bowing, "I am Maître Drugeon, notary, and come from Amélie-les-Bains for the purpose of bringing you—"

"My brother's will. I know, I know. I left orders that you should come for me here. My dear Freneuse, you will excuse me. I was expecting this gentleman to arrange a family matter, and must take leave of you. But we shall meet again soon, and all, I trust, will be arranged to your satisfaction and ours. This visit does not count. Come, Marguerite," added M. Paulet, who was quite beside himself.

Marguerite had not waited for her father's invitation to move towards the door. She went out without deigning to look at Freneuse, but she honoured Binos with a smile of which he was very proud. The notary had not come to Paris to see pictures, and was already on the stairs. Freneuse showed the father and daughter to the landing with ceremonious politeness, checking with a glance the ardour of Binos, who would have liked to accompany them much further.

"Well, Monsieur Drugeon," began M. Paulet, taking the arm of the notary as he descended the stairs, "you will show me this will of which your telegrams have given but a vague summary. You must know it is no laughing matter to lose an inheritance of this importance, which is mine by law."

"I have done all that could be done to ward off the blow," replied the notary, "and had it depended on me, you would not have been disinherited."

"Yes, yes, I know it; and I am the less displeased at your want of success, since Providence has done what you failed to do."

"How is that?"

"I have good news in return for your bad news. My brother's will is worthless."

"Excuse me, monsieur, I have seen it, and can assure you that it is per-

fectedly regular. It is dated, signed and written by the testator, who took the precaution to read it aloud before several witnesses. Nothing is wanting, then, and you would be wrong to indulge in a hope that—”

“Nothing is wanting, only it has lapsed,” replied M. Paulet.

“Lapsed!” repeated M. Drugeon. “Do you understand the exact signification of this word?”

“Perfectly. It signifies that the said Bianca Astrodi, having died a day before my brother, could not inherit from him.”

“You have the proof of her death?”

“I shall have it to-morrow. So, you see, all is for the best.”

The notary shook his head and appeared unconvinced.

“You will be satisfied of it, when I show you a copy of the certificate of death.”

“It is not that, monsieur, but Bianca Astrodi was not the sole legatee. Monsieur François Boyer left his fortune to his two natural daughters. Bianca and Pia. If one is dead, the other will inherit the whole—unless she, too, died before your brother.”

“Ah! good Heavens!” exclaimed M. Paulet, “then all is lost, for this Pia is living; I have just seen her, the wretch.”

Marguerite had heard everything. “My loss is greater still,” she murmured. “May she die as well, the odious creature, who has taken from me the man I love and the fortune that ought to have been mine!”

VII.

THE poor of Paris inhabit remote districts, which, before the destruction of the old barrières, were outside the town limits, and their burial-places also lie beyond the fortifications. The large cemeteries inside the city exclusively belong to the privileged beings who have the means of obtaining a perpetual grant of a piece of soil. A corner is reserved for a common place of burial, but the middle-classes, those who can purchase only a temporary grant, are no longer admitted to Montmartre, Père Lachaise and Montparnasse, but are relegated to the two suburban cemeteries of Saint-Ouen and Ivry. In French villages the graveyards belong alike to all. The farm labourer repose in the same strip of ground as the lord of the château. Social distinctions end with the grave. But in Paris, the city of equality *par excellence*, the rich alone have the right to have their bones preserved. Ivry, where the guillotined are interred, is very gloomy, Saint-Ouen is sad and desolate; whereas Père Lachaise, Montmartre, and Montparnasse have special characteristics of their own. The cypresses have had time to grow there, the monuments are venerable, and moss covers the tombs of departed generations. Illustrious memories linger in the air.

Saint-Ouen dates from yesterday. It is young, common-place, and quite devoid of majesty. It is dry and bare, but it is not silent. The whistle of locomotives can be heard with the noise of tramways, and the din and music of public houses; for, after passing the barrière, the roadside is lined with taverns and suburban ball-rooms.

Over the dusty road leading to Saint-Ouen, a cab was rolling at about noon on the day following the visit of M. Paulet and his daughter to the studio, and Paul Freneuse and Pia Astrodi were seated inside. Binos, perched on the box, was discoursing with the driver. Freneuse would have willingly dispensed with the company of the scapegrace, but Binos had

witnessed Bianca's interment, and was needed to point out the spot where the victim of the crime of the omnibus reposed. And Binos had sworn to respect Pia's grief, and not to distress her further by alluding to the murder.

After the departure of the beautiful Marguerite, the two artists had had an animated, and even stormy interview. Freneuse had reproached Binos for the brutality with which he had acquainted Pia with the death of her sister. Binos had laughed at the preference his friend had accorded to a little model, who, to his thinking, was unworthy to serve even as the tire-woman of the beautiful and wealthy Mademoiselle Paulet. Upon this Freneuse, reddening with anger, had requested Binos not to meddle any further with his affairs, or to speak to him again of the real or supposed murder of Bianca Astrodi. This Binos willingly agreed to, having promised secrecy to Piédouche respecting his operations, past and future. It was agreed that they should go together the next day to Saint-Ouen, and that, after accompanying them to the tomb, Binos should leave Freneuse alone with Pia.

So Freneuse went for Pia early the next morning to the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Bernard. It was the first time he had set foot in the room, the modest furniture of which had been bought with the money made by sitting for him, and at another time, even the day before, his entrance would have brought joy with it. But the child was no longer herself. She turned pale and staggered on seeing Freneuse, but still she had strength to slip from him when he advanced to support her. He told her, gently, that he had come to accompany her to the cemetery, and take there some flowers to place on Bianca's tomb. To the great surprise of the artist, she hesitated to follow him, and was only prevailed upon when reminded that without him she could not find her sister's grave.

Their ride was a silent one. The cab stopped on the Place Pigalle outside the house tenanted by Freneuse, who at once alighted to call Binos. The latter took his seat on the box, and Freneuse was left *tête-à-tête* with his *protégée*, who still maintained silence. Without exchanging a word, they reached the entrance of a short road, which branches off from the main thoroughfare, and leads to the cemetery. There are people of various crafts who gain a livelihood from the dead: marble workers who deal in funeral urns and truncated columns, gardeners with flower-pots for sale, medalled guides who exhibit the *beauties* of the cemetery to strangers, not to mention the hearse drivers engaged in refreshing themselves in the wine-shops at the street corner. The apparition of Pia created a flutter among all these folks. The child had not adopted a mourning garb, which would have required conformity to the French style of dress, and she possessed no habiliments but those of her country. So she wore the white headgear and red petticoat of the woman of Subiaco, a costume often met with in the neighbourhood of the Rue des Martyrs, but rarely at the entrance to a cemetery. The girls of the Abruzzi die, it is true, like the Parisians, and this one, it might be inferred, waited at the gate of the Saint-Ouen cemetery for the hearse of one of her fellows, but the presence of Freneuse ill accorded with such a supposition. Though they had alighted from the same vehicle, the elegance of his appearance hardly admitted of the assumption that he was the relative of the girl in the scarlet petticoat. It is true, Binos in his pilot jacket and soft felt hat might have passed for an unengaged model.

Freneuse perceived that he attracted more attention than he would have desired, and hastened to make purchases. The only question was what

to select. A variety of objects in bad taste were spread out before him ; crowns of immortelles, crowns of imitation pearls, artificial flowers in glass cases. He passed all these by, and at last purchased four pots of fresh flowers from a gardener. Pia had lingered behind to buy a small cross of black pearls, which she paid for herself. Binos, who had a good reason for refraining from buying, had gone on in advance, and Freneuse was surprised to see him calling and beckoning to a woman in front of him—a woman muffled in an old worn tartan, and wearing an astonishing bonnet of the kind which was the fashion when leg-of-mutton sleeves were in vogue.

"Is he about to serve us one of his tricks ?" Freneuse asked himself. "What is that old hag doing here, dressed like one of the learned donkeys exhibited at fairs ? I ought not to have brought this animal, who respects nothing with us. Ah ! there he comes, bringing the old witch here ! Surely he is stark mad."

Binos had, in fact, passed his arm in the old woman's and dragged rather than conducted her, for she appeared to follow him reluctantly. Pia had advanced to join Freneuse, but she stopped short at sight of Binos and his strange companion. "Allow me to introduce to you Madame Sophie Cornu," cried Binos, "who honours me with her friendship, and who has paid out of her own pocket for the ground where Bianca Astrodi rests. Madame Cornu, this is my friend Paul Freneuse, an artist, who exhibits at all the shows, and has been three times medalled."

"That, now, is what I call being an artist," muttered the woman. "It is you that has your studio in the big house on the Place Pigalle. I know all the neighbourhood. Is it true you are a friend of this worthless Binos ?"

Freneuse was crimson with anger, and was about to turn his back on Sophie Cornu, when she resumed : "Good ! silence gives consent. I asked because you look like a gentleman, while Binos—I suppose he cleans your palette. And the girl with the red petticoat is a model, hey ?"

"What, respectable Madame Cornu ?" said Binos, "don't you guess ? Look closer and you will see the likeness."

"You are right, my boy, the very picture of my deceased lodger. Call her here, so that I may embrace her."

Madame Cornu had a ringing voice which Pia could not have failed to hear. But Freneuse interposed. "Madame," he said, severely, "this child is overwhelmed with grief, and I pray you to weigh your words. I know you were good enough to bury her sister at your own expense, but you should understand the pain it gives her to recall this sad circumstance."

"I don't want to pain her, and in proof of it I'll say nothing more while we are in the cemetery ; but afterwards I must speak with her, so that she may come to fetch her sister's trunk. But torment her ! ah, you don't know me ; ask Binos if I'm malicious. Do you know what I came here for ? I came to see a marble-man about a pretty tombstone—"

"That is my affair," said Freneuse, quickly.

"No, no, you may divide, if you will, but I insist on paying part. I am now going to see if the gardener brought the flowers I ordered yesterday. Be easy—I won't inconvenience you. I'm going on ahead. Binos will give me his arm."

Pia and Freneuse followed Binos and the old woman into a pathway, bordered on one side with three rows of modest tombs and on the other by a large field, in the midst of which there was a long, newly opened trench. This trench was the common grave. Beyond stretched a forest of black

wooden crosses, as crowded together as those whose tombs they served to mark had been when alive in the great city—dejected bent crosses, well-nigh uprooted by the wind. From afar, women were to be seen wandering through this funereal labyrinth in search of the spot where some beloved relative reposed ; bending to read the names the rain had half effaced, and falling on their knees beside the freshly turned-up earth. Paul bethought him that, but for this old woman, the body of Bianca would have been thrown into the common burial-place of the abandoned, and at the thought the lodging-house keeper of the Rue des Abbesses appeared less ugly and ridiculous in his eyes. Binos was walking so rapidly that it was with difficulty the old woman kept pace with him ; and no doubt the scamp was dis coursing on some interesting topic, for he was gesticulating with extraordinary animation. “What can he be saying ?” thought Freneuse. “He is quite capable of relating the story of the omnibus, and I can foresee the result of his imprudence. Madame Cornu will retail it through all the neighbourhood ; it will reach the ears of the commissary, and an inquiry will be opened. And heaven knows what would be gained by that. I would wager there was no crime after all. The man and woman were at the theatre together, which only proves that they became acquainted upon leaving the omnibus. As for the pin, it was a mere fancy of Binos’s that it was poisoned. Mirza died of a convulsion.”

While giving the reins to his imagination in this style, Freneuse walked on silently by Pia’s side. Soon the advance guard turned to the right, and they followed a path skirted by a row of stunted cypresses. There was no marble, no display of tombstones, but a great many graves which had been recently adorned with flowers ; and women who had been tending little flower-gardens recently planted over an infant’s or a husband’s grave passed to and fro with watering-cans. Binos appeared from behind a cypress bush and signed to the others to approach. They were within a few steps of the spot. As Freneuse advanced, he heard the rough voice of Sophie Cornu saying : “What ! is it you, Madame Blanchelaine ! I wish my house may take fire if I expected to find you here.”

The cypresses concealed the person addressed by Madame Cornu, and the name of Blanchelaine was unfamiliar to Freneuse. Binos then pointed to a hillock surrounded by a wooden railing, paid for, no doubt, by the generous Sophie. Pia was very pale, but she approached the grave and placed on it the little cross she had purchased at the gate. Then she began to pray with her hands clasped and her forehead pressed against the railing. Freneuse retreated softly to avoid disturbing her, and returned to the walk where he had left the man carrying the four flower-pots.

“Help me to carry them,” he said to Binos. “I don’t wish Pia to be disturbed by this porter.”

“I will carry them myself,” replied Binos. “But worthy Sophie has been robbed. The gardener whom she paid yesterday to put some flowers on the tomb has not done so.”

“Your Sophie is insufferable. Did she come to a graveyard to gossip, as if it were a shop. And who is that woman talking to her ?”

“Why, dear me ! I don’t know. All I can say is, she is dressed like a princess. Madame Cornu has fine acquaintances. Hey ! porter, come on, so that I may rid you of your pots.”

While Binos was carrying the flowers, Freneuse, who moved aside to allow him to pass, found himself near a cypress, behind which stood the two women, and he overheard the following words spoken in clear tones : “It

is true, then, my good Madame Cornu, that one of your lodgers has been carried to the Morgue. You will remember that the last time you came to consult me, I prophesied a misfortune to you. I felt uneasy, and called at your house. They told me you had gone to Saint-Ouen, and I wanted so much to see you that I took a cab and followed on. I got here first."

"No doubt. I came in an omnibus. But—you knew, then, where the girl was buried?"

"I had been told her name, and inquired of the keeper. But you are not alone, I see."

"No; I met an acquaintance at the gate—that fellow with the goatee; he's the one that told me the girl was at the Morgue."

"Did that young girl praying at the grave come with him?"

"Yes, and with another—a painter. What has become of him?"

"A painter? In fact she is dressed like an Italian. A model no doubt?"

"Just so, Madame Blanchelaine, and the dead girl's sister."

"Her sister! Impossible!"

"Yes, her name is Astrodi, and they were enough alike to be known for sisters."

"It is extraordinary!"

Freneuse had not lost a word of this dialogue, and was astonished at the interest Sophie Cornu's friend exhibited in Bianca. He wished to get a sight of her, and glided between the cypresses. Pia was still praying, and Binos was exerting himself in slipping the flower-pots between the interstices of the railing. The first thing Freneuse perceived was the tartan of Mademoiselle Cornu, whose back was turned towards him, and then a woman elegantly dressed, who stood facing him, and whose face, he thought, was not unfamiliar. He observed that she was looking at him with all her eyes, and he guessed that she was asking his name, for she spoke in an undertone to Sophie Cornu. Suddenly a recollection flashed through his mind. "It is the woman I saw at the Porte-Saint-Martin," he murmured.

This meeting was something more than singular. Freneuse had just found excellent reasons for demonstrating to himself that Binos's fancies were purely chimerical, and that Bianca Astrodi had died a natural death. And now all his suspicions revived. Why was this woman here by the dead girl's tomb? The explanations she had given to Sophie Cornu had the appearance of pretexts invented to justify her presence. Why did she cry out "impossible!" when she was told that Pia was the dead girl's sister? He manœuvred so as to draw closer to the two women, and though they spoke low, he caught the words: "As you have company I will leave you, but we shall meet again during the day."

"I am coming to see you," rejoined the other. "I have a great deal to say, and it is long since you have give me a consultation."

"At your service, dear Sophie, but come alone." And leaning towards Mademoiselle Cornu the strange woman whispered in her ear something which Freneuse did not catch, but he guessed that she was enjoining her not to give him her address. After this the two friends shook hands, and the mysterious woman departed without appearing to perceive that two men were watching her; for Binos, too, had ended by taking note of the apparition, and was promising himself to question the providential Cornu concerning her. Meanwhile, Pia had finished her prayer and rose up with a tearful face. She stood for a few moments leaning against the rail-

ing, her eyes fixed on the earth which covered the remains of her sister, then she rapidly made the sign of the cross and turned towards Freneuse. She had ceased to weep, and her pale face wore an expression which he had never seen on it before. "Thank you," she said in a firm voice, "thank you, and farewell."

"Farewell!" exclaimed Freneuse, "I hope you don't mean to go without me. The cab which brought us will convey us back to the Place Pigalle; you will breakfast at the studio, and then you can resume the sitting interrupted yesterday."

"No, I shall not sit any more."

Freneuse was about to protest, but he bethought himself in time that Bianca's tomb was not the place to discuss with an over-excited girl a resolution which she would, doubtless, reconsider. "Well," he said, "we will say adieu for to-day; you are distressed, and it is only right you should have some rest, but you will promise me to return to the Rue des Fossés Saint-Bernard."

"And pass by the Rue des Abbesses," said Mademoiselle Cornu who had approached silently. "She must come for her sister's papers and things. I have no mind to keep them."

"It is useless, madame," murmured the girl. "I claim nothing that was hers."

"It's no use not to claim them, I shall return the things to you all the same. I know now where you lodge. But I have nothing more to do here, and must look up that rascal of a gardener who took my money and hasn't sent me so much as a pot of gilliflowers."

"I am going with you, mademoiselle," cried Binos. He offered his arm which she accepted, muttering a few words which were certainly not compliments. Pia took a last look at the grave where Binos had planted the flowers bought by his friend, and descended the path. She walked with downcast eyes and in perfect silence. Freneuse waited for a moment and then suddenly said: "Little one, you distress me very much."

"I?" murmured the girl, without daring to look up at him.

"Yes, you. I understand your grief and that you wish to rest for a few days, but why do you talk of never returning to my studio? Have you any cause of complaint against me?"

"No, Monsieur Paul, I have received nothing but kindness from you."

"You owe me no thanks. How could I help being interested in you, all alone as you were—at least I believed so, and now it is only too true; but to desert me thus, I have not deserved it that I know of. Have I wounded you without knowing it?" Pia turned away her head to hide her tears. "There! you are weeping! I have guessed it then; I have unintentionally grieved you. Tell me how, so that I may not repeat it."

"You have done nothing, Monsieur Paul, you have always been kind to me; I should have starved to death perhaps if you had not found me in the street. I have never been so happy as since I have known you, and I shall never be so again."

"Then why do you leave me?"

"Because I must."

"Why must you?"

"I want to go back to Subiaco."

"And what would you do there? sit for the artists who come there during the winter? You wouldn't make a living; the women in your mountains are all so beautiful, that artists are puzzled which to choose."

"No, Monsieur Paul, I shall sit for no one. I shall tend goats as before."

"You are insane! If your mother were there, I could account for this whim; but you say you have not even a relative there."

"And I have no one here to love me now."

"I count for nothing, then. You ought not to talk like that, Pia, and if I did not know you as well as I do, I should think you heartless. When I have given you a thousand proofs of my esteem and affection, to tell me that you mean to see me no more! I might remind you that your departure will embarrass me very much, as I should be unable to finish my picture." Pia burst into sobs, and Freneuse went on, with undisguised emotion: "But I prefer to tell you that it is not only the model I should regret. I am attached to you, and should have a horror of my studio if you did not return to it."

"I cannot! I cannot!" the girl said in a husky voice. "I should like to, but—you saw how it nearly killed me yesterday."

This time Freneuse understood. The truth, of which he had a glimmering, plainly appeared, and it was now his turn to be silent. He tried to soothe Pia without promising to close his door upon Mademoiselle Paulet, and we must do him the justice to state that he thought less of a forfeited exhibition than of the touching grief of the young Italian girl, who had yielded to a hopeless love. They walked on in silence till they reached the entrance to the cemetery. Binos, who had long legs, had reached there before them in company with Sophie Cornu, who ambled on like a rat.

"Would you consent to sit for me elsewhere than in my studio?" asked Freneuse suddenly. Pia shook her head sadly. "In a place where I would receive no one but you, and where I should pass six hours of the day with you? I am behindhand and need long sittings," he added laughing.

"If I thought that possible—" murmured the girl.

"You wouldn't fly away to the land of oranges," finished Freneuse, gaily. "Well, I ask nothing more. Merely promise me that you won't start without seeing me again, and that you will wait in the Rue des Fossés Saint-Bernard till you hear from me."

"I swear it on the soul of my sister!" replied Pia, raising her big eyes to his face.

"Enough. You will accompany me to my door—to my door only, and then the cab shall take you home."

Freneuse had had an idea; Pia did not guess it, but she ceased to weep.

VIII.

THE Rue de la Sourdière is one of the streets which the central transformations of Paris have failed to affect. It is to-day as it was a century ago, while all is changed around it. The Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs and the Rue Saint-Honoré clamour to the north and south in vain—in vain comes all the stir of the Saint-Honoré Market to the east, the old Rue de la Sourdière remains as peaceful as a grandmother asleep in a chimney-corner. Persons come there when business leads them, but none pass by. The fact is it leads nowhere. It is a brave old street, an honest street. Evil-doers have no abode there, and the "irregulars," who frequent the Bois de Boulogne, do not suspect its existence. It is, as the English would say, "respectable." Not that it is inhabited by millionaires, but its honest

denizens have enough to live on and a gentle bearing. On summer evenings the game of battledoor and shuttlecock is played from one sidewalk to the other. Chairs are brought out, and neighbours chat together. Grass is springing up amid the pavement, and hens may be seen marauding about. The sound of wheels draws the inhabitants to the windows. It is the provinces, so to say, in the midst of Paris. The houses present a good appearance with their monumental entrances, silent courts and broad stone steps. They appear to have been designed to shelter ex-magistrates, retired prebendaries, or simply sages disgusted with the world.

Auguste Blanchelaine had three years ago chosen his dwelling there, and was not the least quiet or least respected of the inhabitants of this well-reputed quarter. On the first storey of an imposing house, one might read on a copper plate his name, followed by the words: "Business Agent;" while on the left side of the same landing there shone an inscription unintelligible to many people entering the house. "Stella, pupil of Mademoiselle Lenormand. Consultations from 12 to 5."

Consultations upon what? Many would never guess, but many others, maybe, could understand; for there are several old women in Paris still, who remember Mademoiselle Lenormand, the fortune-teller of the Rue de Tournon, and who firmly believe that fifteen years before Napoleon I. took the coronation oath, she prophesied that Josephine would become Empress of France. Stella, the pupil of this illustrious feminine divinity, had for her clients a great many servant maids, and "irregulars" with a few women of the middle classes, and even some real ladies who might have arrived in carriages, had they not feared to compromise the armorial bearings on their panels. Stella belonged to the great school of sibyls of the past. She was not a somnambulist. She simply prophesied with cards or without them in her seasons of inspiration, and these came when she was paid well.

The two suites of apartments, that of the fortune-teller and that of the agent, occupied the whole first floor. They were quite distinct, just as M. Blanchelaine's clients were distinct from Stella's, but they were united in the sense that communication was possible between them without crossing the landing. The arrangements in both were identical: an anteroom, a dining-room, an office and a sleeping-chamber; but the furniture by no means corresponded. Stella's was covered with black stuff; and curiosities, chests of the middle ages, curule chairs, bookcases filled with musty conjuring-books, and an assortment of stuffed owls were alone to be seen in her reception-room. The curtains were never drawn aside; complete darkness reigned there, even at mid-day, and the habitation of the pythoness was merely lighted by old iron lamps suspended from the ceiling. At Blanchelaine's, on the contrary, all was bright, fresh, and modern. Mahogany and walnut, paper at a franc the roll, a sideboard set off with Creil china, a desk with drawers and a green leather chair, rows of pigeon-holes, and busts of juris-consults on brackets against the walls. A little negro twelve years old admitted Stella's clients, while those of Blanchelaine were introduced by an under clerk.

On the afternoon of the day which Freneuse had begun by accompanying Pia to the cemetery, M. Paulet and Sophie Cornu met at the foot of the staircase leading to the sanctum of the sorceress and to the office of the agent. Sophie Cornu had ascended three stairs, while M. Paulet stopped in the vestibule to wipe his feet on a straw mat.

"What pretty folks this fellow receives," thought M. Paulet, impressed

by the preposterous appearance of Sophie Cornu, whom he took for one of Blanchelaine's clients.

"What is this pretentious personage here for?" said Sophie to herself. "He looks like a tipstaff who has made his fortune by pumping money out of the poor."

This was their amiable frame of mind, one towards the other, when Sophie Cornu reached the landing, and M. Paulet had the satisfaction of seeing her ring at one door, just as on the other he perceived the plate bearing in black letters the name of Blanchelaine. A youngster, with disordered hair and a pen behind his ear, opened the door in response to his ring, and invited him to enter, without asking his name. He was shown into an anteroom, furnished with four cane chairs, and ornamented with placards, containing the names in order of seniority of all the public officers of the department of the Seine.

"One would fancy oneself at an attorney's, upon my word," said Paulet, shrugging his shoulders. "This intriguer gives himself fine airs, but it shall not prevent me from speaking my mind. When I think of his having the audacity to ask me a hundred thousand francs! Fortunately, they have not been paid to him."

"The governor is ready for you," said the clerk, appearing at the entrance of a passage.

M. Paulet slowly proceeded towards an open door at the end of this passage, where he found Blanchelaine standing. The agent received him with respectful attention and without manifesting any surprise. "I did not anticipate, monsieur, the honour of receiving you in my modest abode," he said, bowing. "And I regret that you should have given yourself this trouble, as it was my intention to call upon you to-morrow and place in your hands, as agreed upon, the certificate of Bianca Astrodi's death."

"I have no use for your certificate," said M. Paulet bluntly. "You have been juggling with me, or rather, you have shamefully deceived me."

"Be good enough to explain yourself, monsieur, and be seated," said Blanchelaine quietly, placing a chair for his guest.

M. Paulet accepted it unhesitatingly, with the air of a man who is preparing to enter upon a series of reproaches. "You dare to assert that you have not been trifling with me," he began. "I charged you with investigations concerning a daughter of my brother's—a daughter born in Italy. You ascertained that the girl was dead, but took good care not to inform me that she had a sister."

"I could not tell you what I did not know myself yesterday."

"Then you only learn it from me?"

"No; I have known it for a few hours. But I don't see that the existence of this sister need occasion you alarm. Bianca Astrodi, having died before Monsieur François Boyer, could not be his heir."

"Yes, but you, who pretend to know everything, are then ignorant of the tenor of my brother's will."

"I presume no one knew it before the death of the testator."

"Well, I know it now. The notary who had charge of my interests has shown me a copy. My brother left his whole fortune to his two daughters, Bianca and Pia Astrodi. Bianca is dead, but Pia lives." The agent changed countenance. "I am not inconsolable," continued M. Paulet; "but I wished to signify to you that our connections are at an end, and to ask to have the contract I signed returned to me—it can be of no further use to you."

"It is of no use to me—now," said Blanchelaine slowly, "but the situation may change."

"What do you mean?" asked M. Paulet, ill-humouredly. "It is a matter of positive facts, not of fanciful suppositions. You can draw no profit from an engagement made with me upon conditions the realisation of which has become impracticable. You can have no interest in preserving it, and I insist upon its return."

"Allow me to inquire what interest you have in recovering it?" asked Blanchelaine, coldly.

"I wish to destroy all trace of an agreement, which I regret having entered into."

"I might reply that I wish to preserve these traces, and that you cannot compel me to restore a contract freely signed by you. But I prefer to shew that this contract may serve me still. Will you be kind enough to recall its tenor?"

"I have not forgotten it. It states that in compensation for certain work undertaken by my order, but not specified on the paper, I owe you the sum of a hundred thousand francs, payable the day—you understand—that I come into possession, as natural heir, of my share of the inheritance of Monsieur François Boyer, my step-brother."

"Exactly, monsieur, and I hold to the terms of our contract."

"Then you will never receive your hundred thousand francs, since I shall never receive a sou of the inheritance."

"How do you know that?"

"Oh, no equivocations, pray. You will not have the effrontery to tell me that should this Pia disappear the inheritance would revert to me. Pia Astrodi has survived the testator, so she has inherited, and her death could not restore my brother's fortune to me. This fortune would pass to her relatives, or, failing these, to the State, the Italian law being, it may be presumed, framed after the French."

"It is, I believe."

"What can you hope for, then?"

"That is my secret."

"A secret which I have a right to know. I refuse to lend myself to the intrigues which you doubtless meditate, to involve a case which is clear enough—much too clear."

"You are not responsible for what I may do."

"I trust not."

"Then allow me to carry out my purpose."

"It is not in my power to hinder you, but I warn you that you will not be paid for your trouble. I look upon the inheritance as lost, and wish to hear no more about you."

"You shall hear no more of me till I am in a position to prove to you that the situation is altered, and this may not be in a week, a month, or a year. I will add that it will be left to you to put a valuation upon the service which I shall have rendered you."

"In that case what use do you intend to make of the paper I have signed?"

"Show it, if ever you—or others—call in question the means I have employed. This paper is my guarantee. It proves that we have acted conjointly. The nature of the measures with which I am charged is not specified; but it follows naturally enough that I have acted by your orders."

"In other words, if the authorities take up the affair you will try to compromise me. I warn you that you will fail. I am too well known to be accused of having authorised unlawful manœuvres. Let us end the matter, monsieur. Will you return me this engagement?"

"No, nor the letter you wrote me a month ago containing your instructions with regard to Bianca Astrodi, who was to be prevented, at any cost, from coming to Paris, or, if here, from remaining."

"Very well," said M. Paulet, angrily, "keep everything. I defy you, I am not afraid of you."

"So I am convinced," replied M. Blanchelaine quietly, "but you don't scoff at the six hundred thousand francs which would have come into your hands if your brother had not had a second daughter. Instead of quarrelling with me, you would do better to leave the arranging of these affairs in my hands. I must have time, but the day will come when I shall bring you the late Monsieur François Boyer's inheritance on a silver dish, like the keys of a conquered town, and you will have taken no part in the conquest. I shall then exact nothing but what it may please you to give, and I now only ask of you a little information."

"Information!" repeated M. Paulet. "I have none to give you. Obtain it where you can."

"There is one point which you alone can solve, and which will in no way compromise you. Don't several persons know already that Bianca Astrodi was the sister of this Pia?"

"Say rather, every one knows it, or will know it. The revelation was made yesterday in the studio of an artist who employs the girl as a model—Monsieur Paul Freneuse."

"The young man who was with you at the Porte-Saint-Martin?"

"Yes, and he has no reason for keeping the relationship a secret. Moreover, a comrade of his was present, a dauber, Binos, who strikes me as a prattler. You may safely assume that the news has circulated through all the studios of the neighbourhood."

"Do others beside yourself, monsieur, know that Monsieur François Boyer left his fortune to the two Astrodis?"

"The notary knows it, and my daughter. I was informed of it in her presence."

"But the others—those you mentioned—Monsieur Freneuse, Monsieur Binos?"

"Why! I did not amuse myself with repeating the story to them."

"Naturally, and you won't do so. But the sister—this Pia?"

"She, too, is ignorant; but she will not remain so."

"Who will tell her, then? Not you, I suppose."

"The notary, probably."

"He knows, then, that she is in Paris?"

"Yes, I told him I had just seen her. She was at Monsieur Freneuse's when this notary, who had been looking for me, appeared."

"The deuce! that is vexatious. But he does not know the girl's address?"

"Not that I am aware of. But he may easily obtain it by inquiring of Monsieur Freneuse."

"And you think he will do that?"

"I don't know. It would appear to me to be his duty."

"Why? Is he the executor of the will?"

"No."

"Then it is not his province to institute a search for the heirs."

"No; on the contrary he has always defended my interests. I have settled my accounts with him, and it is not his intention, I believe, to remain longer in Paris."

"Can you tell me what hotel he is staying at?"

"At No. 75, Rue du Bouloï. I hope it is not your design to entertain him with these projects of yours, which I don't know and don't wish to know."

"I shall do nothing of the kind, I beg you to believe. But I wish to satisfy myself that he is not occupying himself about Pia Astrodi, and to do this it will not be necessary to enter into any relations with Monsieur—May I inquire his name?"

"Drugeon," replied M. Paulet, enticed gradually, almost unconsciously, into confidences. He quieted the scruples of his conscience by assuring himself that he had no part in these proceedings, while at the same time he judged it useless to break entirely with a man who promised to restore to him the lost inheritance.

"Thank you, monsieur," said the agent, "and I swear that you will not regret having put me in the way to serve you."

"Remember that everthing is at an end between us," said M. Paulet, and he rose with a dignified air. Blanchelaine bowed humbly and showed him to the door in silence.

He returned to his private room, but instead of taking his seat before his desk, he pressed his ear against the partition, and a minute afterwards rapped on it three times at carefully marked intervals. Three similar raps responded—and he next pressed a brass knob skillfully concealed in the panelling. Instantly a panel slipped aside, discovering an opening large enough to admit of the passage of a man. It was a woman who glided into Blanchelaine's cabinet by this secret door—a woman clad in a long black dressing-gown and red silk turban. Under these strange habiliments Paul Freneuse would have had some difficulty in recognising the person whom he had seen at Saint-Ouen and in the stalls at the Porte-Saint-Martin. It was she, however, and her fortune-teller's garb did not ill become her. In contrast with her head-gear, her complexion appeared less inflamed and the flowing robe revealed her figure to advantage. However, her face wore an expression of anxiety. "I have seen her," she said, without any preamble.

"Whom?" asked Blanchelaine, impatiently.

"Sophie Cornu. She came to consult me, and I profited by the opportunity to ask for details. But those I received were of no great interest. It was this Binos who told her at the cemetery yesterday that Bianca had a sister. Binos explained to her how he found out her relationship to the model. On the day before yesterday he went to see an artist who lives on the Place Pigalle—"

"Paul Freneuse, the one who undertook to follow us the other evening, and whom we foiled so prettily."

"Yes, I have not done laughing about it yet. That cab stroke was of my invention. Well, Binos, on entering his friend's studio, immediately bawled out that he knew the name of the girl they were exhibiting at the Morgue, that she was called Bianca Astrodi."

"Ah! the rascal! And I had forbidden him to talk."

"Thereupon this girl, Pia, was taken ill. She exclaimed: 'It was my sister!' and fainted away. That was how they found out."

"I hope this brute of a Binos didn't speak of me to Freneuse! did he mention me before the old woman?"

"No; Sophie does not know you, but she calls me Madame Blanchelaine, and the name would have struck him."

"Binos does not know my name. For the *habitues* of the Grand Rock I am Piérouche."

"True, I had forgotten."

"And he doesn't know where I live—provided Sophie Cornu doesn't take it into her head to tell him!"

"No danger. Why should she meddle with this affair? She doesn't suspect you even know the existence of all these people."

"So much the better; for if she blabbed we should have another bad card to play. Binos would set the powder alight. He is intimate with this fellow Freneuse, who has already acted the spy on us. If he discovered that Piérouche was named Blanchelaine, and had an agency in the Rue de la Sourdière, there would be nothing left but to pack off!"

"Bah! that won't happen. And it is of no consequence that Bianca had a sister; Paulet will inherit none the less, and you will receive your hundred thousand francs."

"You think so?" said Blanchelaine. "Paulet has just left here, and has informed me that his brother left his fortune to his two daughters, Bianca and Pia, in equal portions. Now that the elder one has departed this life, everything reverts to the younger."

"Ah!" murmured the fortune-teller, in consternation, "to run such risk for nothing!"

"Yes, the blow is a severe one, but I don't confess myself beaten. If I must lose the hundred thousand francs that Paulet contracted to pay me, I will find another way of recovering it. I won't compromise myself to no purpose."

"I should be inconsolable if it were so; but what can we do? You don't mean to repeat Bianca's story, I hope. It would be too dangerous."

"And would effect nothing. But I can find more than one way of disposing of a woman who embarrasses me."

"I know only of one," said Stella, gloomily, "and to begin again would be playing high."

"And it isn't our game," replied Blanchelaine, quietly. "If Pia died tomorrow, she would none the less have inherited, and if she had no heir, the State would claim the inheritance. We are interested, on the contrary, in her living."

"I don't catch your idea."

"My idea is to use this Pia for our advantage. She knows that Bianca was her sister, but does not know of this will. No one knows of it but the notary and Monsieur Paulet, and the notary is about to return to his province. We have a careful game to play. You will go to see Pia as soon as I find out where she lives."

"I know that—in the Rue des Fossés Saint-Bernard. It was there that Bianca went every evening."

"If we had known this sooner, we would have manœuvred differently. But it is done, and we must make the best of the situation."

"But under what pretext shall I visit her?"

"Under the pretext that you visited her sister in the Rue des Abbesses. She will be delighted to talk with you about her. You will begin by caressing her, talk to her of her sister's devotion to her, and try to console her."

"It will be difficult. At Saint-Ouen she wept like a Magdalen, and

when she knelt before the tomb I thought she would not have strength to rise."

"That is what we want. She is excitable like all Italians. You will have no difficulty in working upon her."

"To what end?"

"To induce her, first of all, to change her profession, so as to prevent her from returning to this Paul Freneuse. I trust to you to invent a story. You will try the ground. For instance, if you find that she is in love with him—"

"She is. Binos said so to Sophie Cornu. He says she is jealous, and you would never guess of whom—Mademoiselle Paulet."

"Indeed! Freneuse makes a deal of money, and no doubt this idiot of a Paulet wants to give him his daughter in marriage. Freneuse was in their box at the theatre."

"And Mademoiselle Paulet, accompanied by her father, visited his studio, where she found Pia, who went away furious. Binos said she declared she wouldn't come any more."

"Admirable! You will find her well inclined to listen to you, and can easily win her confidence. You will beg leave to bestow on her the affection you felt for her sister, will offer her our assistance if she is in need, and finally propose to receive her at your house, or to take her back to her country if she wishes to return."

"What! you wish to send me to Italy?"

"I prefer to keep our heiress here, but we must be prepared for anything. The important point is to lead her to break up her present connections. I don't wish her to see either Freneuse or Binos again, for in that case Monsieur Boyer's notary might find out what has become of her."

"But suppose we succeed in all this, what shall we gain?"

"My plan is one that may be modified according to the turn events may take. A great deal may be done with an enthusiastic girl whose feelings are worked upon adroitly. She may be persuaded to relinquish the inheritance. If, as Binos asserts, she is in despair because Freneuse doesn't love her, she will listen to the advice of those who welcome her, treat her kindly, and try to console her."

"It's possible—with time. But, in truth, it wouldn't be worth our while to take so much pains for the sake of a hundred thousand francs' commission, which Monsieur Paulet will, perhaps, refuse to pay you after all."

"I defy him to do so. I have his written promise, and a letter which compromises him. But you are right to say a hundred thousand francs is very little, when this fellow Paulet is to inherit six hundred thousand."

"Why should we not inherit in his stead?"

"Ah! at last you have hit it. We can quite as easily induce Pia to leave her money to us as to relinquish it—and that is the end I aim at. And to attain it we must make every effort."

"What efforts?"

"First, we must get Pia away from Paris. You will say that you are going to pass a couple of years in Rome for your health; that you need a companion who speaks Italian, and that you apply to her because her sister's kind landlady recommended her. You will add that you are going with your husband, for I shall accompany you."

"Then you abandon your business?"

"I have none so profitable as watching Pia. Besides, it is as well that

we should leave Paris for a time. I am apprehensive of the indiscretions of Binos, and afraid of Freneuse. But in a couple of years the accident to Bianca Astrodi will be an old story."

"We should remain away two years?"

"Two or three and more if necessary. We shall remain until the child can make a legal will—that is, until she is eighteen."

"And do you think it would ever enter her mind to make this will?"

"I will undertake to make the suggestion to her. And to whom would she bequeath what she possesses if not to her benefactors? She has no relatives."

"But she will live longer than we."

"I think not," said Blachelaine drily. "You forget that idiot of a Binos returned me the pin you lost."

IX.

THE house in the Rue des Fossés Saint-Bernard where Father Lorenzo resided was not of prepossessing appearance. It was an old dingy-looking six-storied building, compressed between two structures of comelier aspect, and had a number of narrow irregular windows, no one of which was of the same dimensions as its neighbour. The entrance was through a dark alley, fronted by a wicket-gate, breast high, and ending in a court as dark and damp as the depths of a well. On the ground floor there were two rooms. In one of them, a kind of tavern with a door opening on the street, Lorenzo sold drinks to passers-by, while the other served as a dining-room for the models of both sexes who found a lodgment in these barracks. On dark evenings and in the early morning there was a grand meeting here of Calabrian brigands and peasant girls of the Abruzzi. Italians of all ages, from white-haired grandfathers to little girls of four years old seated on the knees of robust matrons. They spoke in a barbarous dialect, and the smell of garlic and tobacco was preceptible as far as the Jardin des Plantes. All these folks slept in chambers disposed like dormitories, and lived together on reasonably good terms. If quarrels were frequent, personal violence was of rare occurrence. Father Lorenzo had disciplined his lodgers, and inspired them if not with respect, at least with a salutary fear. He was still vigorous despite his sixty-five years, allowed no trifling on the subject of decorum or the payment of rents, and during the fifteen years in which he had exercised his profession had never had dealings with the police. He was reputed, however, to have formerly headed a band which plundered travellers and levied contributions upon landowners in the environs of Terracina. As the terms made with him by Freneuse respecting Pia were advantageous, he treated the girl with respect and consideration. He had even become fond of her, and would have incurred some personal risk in her defence if any scapegrace had ventured to insult her.

Pia lived apart from the rest, in a room on the sixth floor next to the roof, a chamber which had sheltered monkeys and organ-grinders at a time when the poor of Italy were not prohibited from sending their children to beg in France. And she had converted this wretched retreat into a charming nest. It was not remarkable for richness of adornment, this garret in which Pia delighted. Far from it. An iron bedstead, a white wooden table, a trunk, two crayon sketches by Freneuse, on the white-

washed walls, that was all. But she had made good use of the waterspout which bordered her one window, having established there an aviary and a garden, both in contempt of police ordinances. The entire garden was contained in one box, and the aviary only lodged a chaffinch; but the flowers were fresh and the chaffinch sung from morn till eve. And then this garret window looked out on a marvellous vista. The house faced the northeast: to the right was a street lined with shops; to the left, beyond the bridges and above the uneven roofs of Paris rose the height of Père Lachaise crowned with cypresses, whose dark outlines were conspicuous against the blue sky. A whole corner of Paris as viewed by the birds of the air.

On the day after the visit to Saint-Ouen, Pia, who had risen before day-break after a sleepless night, was leaning against the window musing. The air was balmy, and the first rays of the spring sun gilded the house roofs and dispelled the fog. It was the opening of a beautiful day, one of those *fête* days vouchsafed by God to the inhabitants of the great city, who can have no finer sight than the revival of nature. The shop-women were chattering on their door-steps and the children playing in the streets. Father Lorenzo's inmates were preparing to set out for their respective studios. The ex-bandit, now become a landlord, was smoking his pipe in his tavern-room, and smiling with inward satisfaction as he calculated the receipts he would pocket by evening. He remarked with some surprise the absence of Pia, who was usually the first to appear, but he never visited her unless called. And Pia was not thinking of calling on him or of going in quest of her frugal breakfast. Her thoughts were still where they had been when she bade adieu to Paul on the day before, swearing she would not go away till she had seen him, and wondering what he meant by speaking of her sitting to him elsewhere than in his studio. "He understood how I suffered and was sorry for me," she said to herself. "He promised that I should hear from him so as to calm me and keep me from going away. He thought my courage would fail me when I reflected on it, and that I should return to him. But he won't come, why should he? It is rather my place to go to him and beg as a favour to be received. But I sha'n't go, I should find that woman there, and I would rather die than meet her again. I will wait two days, and if I don't see him by then, I will write and say adieu. I will pray once more on Bianca's grave, and then—"

She was at this point in her meditation when there came a gentle knock at the door. She turned pale, and trembled. "If it were he!" she murmured, excess of emotion riveting her to the spot where she stood. Silence followed. Then a louder knock. She tried to answer, but her voice failed her. Finally the thought presented itself that it could not be Freneuse; he would have been less patient, and, besides, the key was outside. At this moment, indeed, it turned in the lock and the door slowly opened. Pia had guessed rightly. It was not Freneuse. But her surprise was great upon seeing an elegantly dressed woman of prepossessing appearance enter the room. She might have been taken for a charitable lady going her rounds among the poor. Unaccustomed to visits of this nature, Pia was about to explain that it was a mistake, when the stranger came towards her, took her two hands in hers and kissed her forehead.

"I see, my dear child," began the lady, taking her seat on one of the three rush-bottomed chairs, "I see from your astonishment that you do not recognise me, and it is very natural, as you barely had a glimpse of me.

I was near you yesterday—it is painful for me to recall those cruel moments—when you were praying for her who is no more.” Pia started, and looked at the woman more attentively. “Yes,” resumed the latter, “at the cemetery of Saint-Ouen—I too had gone to pray beside the grave of our dear Bianca.”

“You, madame!” said Pia, amazed.

“It surprises you because you did not know that I loved her as a mother.”

“You knew her?”

“I have known her for two years. I first saw her at Milan at the house of some friends of my husband, who was then travelling with me in Italy.”

“She never spoke to me of you.”

“Neither did she tell you why she had come to Paris.”

“I beg your pardon, madame, she did.”

The lady bit her lip but was not disconcerted. “Then you knew that Bianca was in search of your father.”

“I knew it.”

“But you did not know that it was through me that she found him.”

“Our father! What, she has seen him, and did not tell me! No, no; it is impossible!”

“She has not seen him; but, after considerable research, I learned that he was residing in the south of France, and Bianca requested me to write to him.”

“And she concealed it from me—that is strange.”

“She concealed from me that she had a sister. She carried prudence, or rather reserve, so far, that I only heard of you yesterday by chance. Bianca had never spoken of you to worthy Mademoiselle Cornu, either; she went to see you under pretext of going to take a singing lesson. When she came to visit me in the morning, she only talked of your father. Her one thought was to find him.”

“But—she did not see him?” asked the young girl in agitation.

“Alas, no; and it was this that killed her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you never learned how your sister died?” asked the lady, after a pause.

“I was told that she died suddenly,” murmured Pia, whose eyes had filled with tears.

“She died of grief. She had an affection of the heart, and when she learned that her father disowned her—”

“Is it possible?”

“To the letter she wrote, reminding him that he had two daughters, he replied most heartlessly. And the poor child had not strength to support this blow.”

“Ah! it is frightful,” sobbed the girl, sinking upon a chair.

The lady raised her, dried her tears with her own handkerchief, and said gently: “Don’t despair, my child. Men are forgetful, and your father yielded, no doubt, to a first impulse of anger on learning that the girl he had abandoned had taken to singing for a livelihood; but his feelings might change—they will change, I trust. What he refused to his elder daughter he may not refuse to you; he will come to your assistance.”

“I shall ask nothing of him,” said Pia, raising her head. “He shall never hear of me.”

“I admire your pride,” the lady said, after a pause, “and I should not have the heart to censure you if you persisted in your determination to

refuse a support which was denied to your sister. But it is time for me to tell you who I am, and why I came. I am Madame Blanchelaine, my husband is wealthy, and we travel every year ; we have already been three times to Italy, and shall certainly return there, for we love your beautiful country. I bless the chance that apprised me that my dear Bianca had a sister who could fill her place in my affections, and when I learned that your only resource was to sit for artists, it occurred to me to make you a more desirable offer."

"Thank you, madame, but I have need of no one," murmured the girl.

"I know it, my child ; I know you are virtuous, economical, and have laid by a little money. But—pardon me for saying so—you will not always be beautiful, and when you have reached the time when you can no longer serve as a model for artists—"

"I shall not wait for that time. I shall sit no more."

"What will you do then ?"

"I am going back to Subiaco, where I was born, and where my mother died."

"To Subiaco ! what a fortunate coincidence ! My husband and I were there two years ago, and were so much delighted with your mountains that we resolved to sojourn ourselves there this spring and remain till the end of the summer. Why should you not go with us ?"

"I, madame ! you forget that I am a poor girl, and expect to resume my old occupation of tending goats."

"Our goats then," said Madame Blanchelaine, with a pleasant smile. "We will buy a flock expressly for you. My husband does everything I wish, and I am unwilling to part with you. Listen, dear Pia, you are alone in the world, and I, who have all I need to make me happy, have been denied one blessing—I have no children, 'tis the great affliction of my life—and I had indulged in a dream which has suddenly vanished. I wished to adopt your sister if your father refused to acknowledge her, to receive and love her as a daughter, and my husband shared my views. We should have married her well and left her our fortune. Death has taken Bianca from us, but you remain and may restore me the hope I have lost. Pia, dear Pia, will you let me be your mother ?"

"My mother !" repeated Pia, lowering her head. "Alas ! I have lost her."

"I will replace her," said the lady eagerly. "Your sister would not have refused me this happiness. If death had not overtaken Bianca, I should have gone to her and said : 'Our house is open to you ; come, we will never be parted again.' And she would have come with us."

"My sister would not have abandoned me."

"Oh no, she would have told me of you ; she would have brought me here, and I should have implored you not to separate from her. I should have had two daughters instead of one. She has been taken, but you remain, Pia ; you are an orphan like herself, alone in the world, without friends, without relatives, since your father has had the barbarity to deny his children ; you will not turn from the new friends who open their arms to you."

"I thank you for your goodness, madame, but I have said that I am going back to Italy."

"And I have told you that my husband and I are going too—that it was our project to pass the summer in your native town. It seems, then, very natural that we should go together. When do you wish to go, dear Pia ? We will choose the day that suits you, my child."

" You are too good, madame, but I cannot promise to accompany you."

" Why? Have you decided to leave France?"

" Yes; but I cannot go before I have said good-bye to some one."

" Some one is interested in you! Ah! I am happy to learn that. I should like to know the name of this faithful friend, so that I may talk over my project with him, and promise to fill his place to you."

" It is the artist who went with me yesterday to Saint-Ouen."

" What! this Monsieur Binos!" exclaimed the lady, who was perfectly aware of the truth. " But he is not a real artist. Mademoiselle Cornu told me he spent his time in cafés instead of working. And, in fact, dear Pia, if it is of this poor youth you wish to ask advice—"

" He is not the one, madame. I speak of Monsieur Paul Freneuse."

" Who resides on the Place Pigalle?"

" Yes, madame."

" It was at his studio that you heard of your sister's death, was it not? He is the artist for whom you have been sitting?"

" Who told you that?" asked Pia, in surprise.

" Mademoiselle Cornu, who had it from that man Binos. Has he promised to come to see you before your departure?"

" Yes; he even made me swear not to go without seeing him."

" And you are expecting him?"

" Yes; why should I doubt his word?"

" I cannot say that he won't keep it, but I doubt if he will find time. He is shortly to be married, you know."

" Monsieur Freneuse to be married! It is impossible!"

" I assure you, my child, it is so," said Madame Blanchelaine. " The bans are published, and the ceremony will take place on the day after the opening of the fine art show. It is a good match for him, for his betrothed brings him a handsome dowry, and is very beautiful. Monsieur Binos told Sophie Cornu all about it. He indeed told her a good deal more—things that I, perhaps, ought not to repeat."

" What did he tell?"

" You embarrass me, dear Pia. I should be sorry to destroy an illusion—and yet, if you were to sacrifice the future I offer you, for the sake of a man who only cares to make use of you—"

" Speak, I beg of you—"

" I am afraid—not only of grieving, but of wounding you."

" The wound is made," said Pia, in a husky voice.

" Well, my poor child, it seems that Monsieur Freneuse has discovered—he has fancied he saw that—I really do not know how to tell you; well, he imagined he inspired you with a sentiment that—"

" Finish, madame. He thought I loved him."

" You are right."

" It is true."

" Alas! I suspected it, and I bless heaven which gave me the idea to come here; there is yet time to save you. I hesitated to tell you the truth, but now I hesitate no longer. If this man concealed his expected marriage from you, it was because he feared he would be left in the lurch. After the scene which took place in his studio, there was another which Monsieur Binos witnessed. Mademoiselle Paulet is very jealous of you and has forbidden her future husband to see you. He has assured her that you shall never set foot there again."

"I don't believe it—it would be unworthy of him ; besides, he saw me the next morning."

"Because it was to his interest not to break with you. Monsieur Fren-euse has a double game to play : he must use circumspection with regard to his betrothed, who is very rich, and he must carefully manage the model whom he cannot replace. And I can guess his plan. Confess, did he not propose to you to sit for him in another studio?"

"He did not speak of a studio, he asked if I would agree to give him sittings in a place where I should be alone with him."

"And you agreed ?"

"No ; I replied that I would wait to hear from him."

"And that you would not go without seeing him again. That is what he wished ; he will come and see you."

"Here ?"

"Beyond a doubt. Here, where you will be at his service till his picture is finished."

"I shall not wait," said Pia, resolutely. She rose abruptly while speaking, and, as she staggered, kind Madame Blanchelaine passed her arm around her. "You are right, my child," she said in her gentlest tone. "We will defeat his calculations. Let him marry Mademoiselle Paulet for her money. You will not stay here to render a service to this man who has been amusing himself with you."

"I want to go away this very evening," interrupted the girl.

"This evening it will, perhaps, be too late ; he will certainly come here to-day. If you wish to avoid him, you have not a minute to lose. My house is open to you, you must come there, and I promise not to try to influence your decision. You will remain with me as long as you please—always, if you like—long enough to dispose of your effects here, and to take possession of those left by your poor dear sister at Mademoiselle Cornu's."

"Why need I do that ?"

"Because you can't abandon what has belonged to your sister. Think of her linen being sold by auction ; and then she had papers, for which you might have use some day. You naturally shrink from entering the house, but you need not do that. I will speak to Mademoiselle Cornu, and have the things sent to me."

"Very well," said Pia, whose one thought was to fly from Paul Freneuse, "I am ready to follow you, madame, if you will promise me that to-morrow I shall leave Paris."

"I promise it, and though it pains me to part with you, I won't hinder you from going alone, if my husband has not completed his preparations. We will join you again at Subiaco. But time is passing. Come, my child."

Pia was in a state of overwrought excitement, which precluded reasoning. She followed Madame Blanchelaine down the stairs without stopping to draw the key from the lock on the door of her room. They met no one on the way. The models and organ-grinders had all taken flight. Father Lorenzo was smoking his pipe at his office door. He gave Pia a friendly salutation, without inquiring where she was going, out of respect for the rich attire of the lady who led his lodger away.

A cab was waiting at the door. Madame Blanchelaine assisted Pia inside, and after giving her address to the driver, quickly jumped in herself and lowered the blinds as the cab set off towards the quay. It was a wise precaution, for another cab was coming from the opposite direction, with sundry paraphernalia on the top, and two gentlemen scated inside.

The two cabs passed each other, and if Madame Blanchelaine, raising one of the blinds a little, took a look outside, the two gentlemen saw neither the lady nor the child she was bearing away. In another moment the second cab stopped and its occupants sprang out, to the great surprise of Lorenzo, who was not accustomed to see so much furniture arrive at his house. "Good day, old bandit!" exclaimed the first who alighted, with a pipe between his lips and a box of paints in his hands. "You don't recognise me, *birbante*. Recognise at least the *illustriSSIMO signor*, the benefactor of one of your house."

"Ah! it is you, Monsieur Freneuse," said Lorenzo, in fairly good French. The retired bandit spoke a little of every language, having had occasion to arrange ransoms with travellers of all nationalities, who were accorded kindly treatment till the time arrived to cut off their ears or their heads if the money were not paid.

"Yes, old Fra Diavolo, it's I," said the artist, gaily. "Be kind enough to help the driver to remove the easel from the top of the cab."

Lorenzo was no talker, and he obeyed in silence.

"You were not expecting us, venerable bandit," resumed Binos. "Never before has your country-seat been honoured by a visit from artists of talent, and it will have this honour every day for three weeks. I advise you to illuminate this evening. Meanwhile, if you still have an old bottle of Capri left, you may serve it to me. I want to clink glasses with you and your boarders. Why are they not at the windows? Fled, hey! The whole troop off for the *pose*?"

"All but Mother Carlotta; her child has a fever," grumbled Lorenzo, as he placed the easel and a covered canvas against the wall.

"Then business prospers. Confess that this is better than the trade you were engaged in between Rome and Naples. Don't disturb Carlotta. When I want a sorceress I will engage her. You and I will drink a bottle together. Signor Freneuse doesn't drink, but he will pay. Have you a boy to take these things upstairs. How many flights. Six, at least, without counting the *entresol*."

"You are coming to work here?" asked Lorenzo.

"Yes, Father Lorenzo," said Freneuse. "I have my picture to finish—"

"You see this picture," interrupted Binos. "Touch it with respect; it is a masterpiece, and it is to be finished at your house."

"When the model won't go to the painter, the painter must go to the model," said Freneuse.

"Ah! Pia," said Lorenzo. "She is distressed because her sister is dead."

"You knew her sister?"

"I saw her every evening. But she didn't answer when I spoke to her. She could have made money enough as a model, but no—she was as shy as a thrush."

"How is Pia?" asked Freneuse.

"She is not ill, signor, but very sad. She cries all day, and eats nothing."

"Her appetite will come back, and her spirits too. I will undertake to cure her. Six hours a day, old fellow!"

"What! in her room?"

"Yes, Father Lorenzo. It is not large, but there is room for my easel, and the light must be better than in my studio. Only, my dear sir, I don't want any gossiping. Not a word to your tenants. They won't see me, for they are absent all day."

"It is understood, signor."

"Now take the easel on your back ; Binos will take the canvas, and I the box of paints. It will be a nice little surprise for Pia when we make our appearance, looking like house-movers."

"Yes, when she returns."

"What ! she has gone out ?"

"Not five minutes ago. I am surprised you did not see her. The cab passed you."

"What ! she goes about in a cab now !" exclaimed Binos. "Well, it's not so to be wondered at if she eschews omnibuses."

"Strange !" began Freneuse : "she promised me—"

"She went away with a lady," said Lorenzo, "a lady who came in a cab, and stayed with her upstairs about a quarter of an hour. She kept the vehicle waiting, and they got in together just as you turned the corner."

"Then we must have passed each other."

"Yes ; the blinds of the cab we passed were down," said Binos.

"True—I remember," murmured Freneuse.

"What did the lady look like ?" asked Binos. "First, was she a lady, or a *painteress*, who came to get Pia for a model ?"

"She wore a black silk dress and a velvet cloak. It was not the first time she has been here."

"Then she knew Pia ?"

"No, I fancy not. She come one evening, when her sister was here, to question me about her and inquire whom she came to see. I told her I knew nothing about it, and that it was no business of mine, upon which she went away grumbling. But this morning she knew exactly who she wanted, for she gave me the name of Pia Astrodi, and told me she was expecting her."

"She lied, evidently. Pia was expecting no one," exclaimed Freneuse.

"You can't answer for that," said Binos ; "the girl didn't talk about her affairs ; she never even spoke to you of Bianca, and it's likely she didn't want any one to know where she was going, as she lowered the blinds."

"Are you certain it was she who lowered them ?" murmured Freneuse. "This sudden departure has rather the look of an abduction, and the lady appears to me suspicious. Pia said nothing to you about her departure ?" he inquired of Father Lorenzo.

"Nothing at all, signor ; she hardly looked at me."

"Then she will return," concluded Binos ; "she has her own furniture, and so she is not likely to walk off in this fashion."

"You are right, let us go upstairs, we will wait for her," said Freneuse, making for the ladder-like staircase. Binos followed without heeding the mumbled words of the landlord, which warned them that Pia always took the key of her door away with her. It proved to be in the lock, however. "It's droll," said Lorenzo, as he remarked it ; "I thought her more careful, but she leaves her chamber at the disposition of the first comer. It's true, there's not much to steal."

Freneuse was silent, but his heart misgave him as he gazed at the empty chamber, and cast his eyes around to see if no letter had been left for him. Some presentiment warned him that Pia had taken flight, and it seemed impossible she had not left him a line, if only one of farewell.

"Here we are," said Binos, who was walking up and down the garret counting his steps as if taking its measure ; "you want nothing to go to work but the model. I am curious to see how you will arrange matters ; there is barely room for your easel in this box."

Thereupon he assisted Lorenzo in installing the various things inside the room, while Freneuse leaned against the window-sill to watch if there were no signs of Pia in the street below. Father Lorenzo went downstairs again; but Binos, suddenly hearing steps on the landing, fancied he was returning. He opened the door, and to his surprise he perceived a well-dressed gentleman, of more respectable mien than was usually seen in the house. "I beg pardon," stammered the new-comer. "I made a mistake, doubtless."

"Who do you want?" thundered Binos.

"I am looking for a young girl—"

"What! at your time of life?"

"An Italian girl who is employed as a model—"

"Come! you don't mean to say that you are an artist?"

"Monsieur!"

"Oh! don't be angry, it is a compliment. You are much too genteel for an artist. You rather look like a judge of the Appeal Court. What is the name of your Italian girl?"

"Pia Astrodi. The landlord told me she lodged on the top floor, and I—"

"And he didn't lie. What do you want with Pia Astrodi?"

"I wished to speak with her on a matter in which she is personally interested."

"That is to say, you have no use for me here. I understand, but the girl has gone out."

"In that case I shall return."

"Stop!" exclaimed Binos, suddenly, with a scrutinizing look at the visitor. "I have a vague impression that I have seen you somewhere."

"It is possible, monsieur. It seems to me also that I have met you, but I do not remember where."

"Ah! now I recollect. It was you who came to the Place Pigalle—to the studio—to see Monsieur Paulet."

"Exactly, monsieur; I remember now that you opened the door for me."

"Quite so. I execrate the race of porters, but replace them sometimes, when occasion requires. Come in, monsieur."

"I beg pardon, but—"

"Pia has gone out, but she will return—and meanwhile you may talk with one of her friends. Here! Freneuse!" cried Binos.

Freneuse was not far off, and had heard the talk. On his approach, the visitor took off his hat, and assumed a different air. He evidently saw nothing in common between Freneuse and the unmannerly fellow who had first presented himself, and was prepared to enter into an explanation. "Monsieur," he said politely, "I am happy to meet you here. I have just called at your studio."

"If I am not mistaken you are Monsieur Paulet's notary," said Freneuse.

"His notary, no. I was the notary of his brother, Monsieur François Boyer, who recently died at Amélie-les-Bains."

"Ah, yes. Monsieur Paulet has spoken to me of the loss he has met with, but I have not seen him since he called at my studio, and—"

"You wish to know why I desire to see you. I will explain it to you."

"No, no, not here," exclaimed Binos, as he drew the visitor into the room. "I received you on the landing because I took you at first for a commissary of police, but now that you are a notary it is different."

Reassured by the presence of Freneuse, the public officer made no objection to entering. "Monsieur," he said, "my name is Drugeon. You are doubtless aware that I came to Paris to confer with Monsieur Paulet

with reference to his brother's will, but you are ignorant, I suppose, that the will has disinherited him."

"True, I was ignorant of it," said Fréneuse, surprised by this preamble.

"Monsieur François Boyer left his whole fortune to two natural daughters of his born in Italy, Bianca and Pia Astrodi."

"What!" exclaimed Fréneuse, "Pia is the daughter of this Monsieur Boyer, the niece of Monsieur Paulet!"

"Not legally. Her father did not recognise her. Had he done so he could not have left her his whole fortune, as by the French law a man may not leave to his own child what he may leave to a stranger."

"It is better to inherit than to have a respectable parentage," said Binos sententiously, "especially if the inheritance is large."

"More than five hundred thousand francs."

"Half a million falling into Pia's apron. And the little booby goes out to take an airing just as a fortune is being brought to her. I've a notion you won't finish your picture, eh Paul?" And Binos gave expression to his delight at the tidings by a spirited dance executed in the centre of the floor to the astonishment of M. Drugeon, who took him for a madman.

"Monsieur," said Fréneuse, less demonstrative, but more seriously moved, "I am happy to learn that the child will be rich, for she is deserving of every happiness, and it comes just as a heavy misfortune has befallen her in the sudden death of her sister."

"Bianca, Pia's co-heiress? In consequence of this death the whole property reverts to her."

"Pia little dreams of such a thing."

"She might have continued ignorant of it if an accident had not apprized me of the existence of the surviving daughter. Monsieur Paulet told me in coming out of your studio, that he had seen his brother's legatee there."

"That was generous on his part, for without this information, Pia's identity might never have been discovered."

"Never, it is very probable. But it was necessary to find the heiress, and for that I am not indebted to Monsieur Paulet. He refused to give me any information, saying that it was not his province to secure the execution of a will which had despoiled him for the benefit of a stranger."

"He refused to tell you then, how you could find Pia!"

"Absolutely. He said he did not wish to hear the heiress mentioned. Mademoiselle Paulet, who came in during the interview, approved of her father's resolution, and insisted that I should cease to meddle with an affair which, she said, did not concern me. She added that this Pia was a vagrant like her sister, and had, no doubt, left Paris."

"Humph!" muttered Binos. "A Rubens! who would have believed it?"

"Happily, monsieur, you did not follow this advice," said Fréneuse, much moved.

"No," replied the notary, "I considered it my duty to take what steps I could to acquaint Pia Astrodi with her father's will, and I delayed my departure for the purpose. I learned at the Prefecture yesterday, that Bianca Astrodi, recently deceased, had lodged at Montmartre, and upon inquiring at the house, I ascertained from the landlady that Pia lived in the Rue des Fossés Saint-Bernard."

"It is very fortunate," muttered Fréneuse; "this morning before going to the cemetery, the landlady did not know it. Monsieur," he added aloud, "I am indebted to you for your generous intervention, which is the

more timely as I have reasons for being uneasy at the absence of this young girl. I came here to complete a picture for which Pia has been sitting. She promised to wait for me, and the landlord informs me that she has gone away unexpectedly in a cab, without saying when she will return or whether she will return at all. It is very singular, and I begin to fear some one has abducted her."

"That would not be an irreparable mischance," replied M. Drugeon, smiling. "girls who are abducted are never lost."

"Oh, it is not an abduction of the sort you infer; Pia has no lover. But she is rich now, and her fortune is perhaps coveted."

"She is rich, but very few persons know it. And if you imagined that her life is threatened, I must remind you that her death would only profit Monsieur Paulet."

"And Monsieur Paulet is surely incapable of seeking such an end by means of a crime. Events have occurred, however, which you are ignorant of, and which may be connected with this inheritance. You know nothing of the manner of Bianca Astrodi's death."

"It was sudden, I believe, and occurred the day previous to that of Monsieur Francois Boyer. Monsieur Paulet was rejoicing over an event which restored to him his brother's fortune, when he learned from me that there was another legatee living. He can have no doubt of this as he has seen her."

"Bianca was murdered," said Binos; "and those who killed her will kill Pia, that is clear as day. It was only ignorance that has kept them from doing it before."

"Murdered!" repeated the notary, astounded: "but an inquiry started by the police establishes that the girl died of an internal rupture."

"All, yes talk about the police—they know nothing. But I have proofs, and with the assistance of a comrade of mine I shall capture the scamps before they dispatch Pia as they did her sister."

"Monsieur," said Frenense, "this is what happened: Bianca Astrodi died one evening in an omnibus in the strangest manner, without a sound or a movement. It was only ascertained that she was dead when the omnibus reached its destination. I picked up a long pin which a woman seated beside Bianca had lost or thrown aside, after making use of it. The next morning I learned by accident that the pin was poisoned. A cat that was pricked with it fell down dead instantly."

"Ah! good heavens! if this woman killed the sister—"

"She might also kill Pia. And I am almost certain it was this very person who has led the poor child away."

"But, monsieur," exclaimed the notary, "if what you say is correct, it is your duty to state the facts with which you are cognizant to the authorities. I am surprised you have delayed so long."

"I see now that I was wrong," said Frenense, "but I did not know that the deceased was Bianca Astrodi, and the heiress of a large fortune. The murder of a young girl, poor and unknown, seemed so inexplicable to me, I could not conceive what interest any one could have in killing her. However, the information you bring throws a new light on the case. Evidently it is the heirs of Monsieur Francois Boyer who are aimed at."

"I was the person who guessed that," exclaimed Binos, "and I confiscated the murderous pin."

"What did you do with it?" asked Frenense, suddenly.

"Ah! ah! you don't forbid me then to speak to you about my opera-

tions. You recognise that I was in the right, and since you acknowledge it I will not be inflexible. Know, then, that I intrusted the pin to a man who has undertaken to have it examined by an expert, to determine the nature of the poison. The experiment must be made by this time. Nothing remains but to ferret the woman out, and my friend Piédouche has that matter in charge. It amounts to the same as having her, for he is of great skill in researches. It only took him half an hour to find out Bianca's lodging place."

"Ah! it was he who took you there?" said Fréneuse.

"You could have known that before if you had taken the trouble to ask. But, as soon as I opened my mouth to pronounce the name of this excellent friend Piédouche, you silenced me."

"Well, speak now. Where is this adroit friend of yours? I hope he has not contented himself with discovering Bianca's lodging."

"I hope not, too, but the bother of it is I haven't seen him since the day he took me to the Rue des Abbesses."

"And you haven't been to his house to inquire for him?"

"No, for an excellent reason. He forgot to give me his address."

"What! you confided the pin to a man, without knowing where he lives!"

"Oh, I know his café. He didn't come yesterday or the day before, but he will come. He is an *habitue* of the Grand Bock."

"And you are relying on this man to find the guilty parties? We will talk no more about him, and you may keep yourself quiet. I shall find them. I saw the woman of the omnibus at the theatre one evening with her accomplice, and the man is a business agent, employed by Monsieur Paulet."

"A business agent—wait a moment," said Monsieur Drugon. "Monsieur Paulet told me that prior to the death of his brother, when he already apprehended this will, he employed an agent to obtain information respecting Bartolomea Astrodi and her children."

"Did he tell you his name?" asked Fréneuse, quickly.

"No, but he would do so, no doubt."

"I hope so. Let us go immediately to Monsieur Paulet. We have not a minute to lose."

"And I?" cried Binos.

"You! I advise you to go to your café and see if your Piédouche is there," replied Fréneuse.

Opening the door, he found himself confronting Lorenzo, bending under the weight of his easel. "Had the woman who came for Pia some red spots on her face?" he asked, abruptly.

"Yes, and coal-black eyes and a large nose—a Roman nose," said the old man. "If she would sit for Medea, I could find her work."

"It is she herself," muttered Fréneuse. "Listen, my good fellow. Set your burden down here, lock this door, and take away the key. If Pia returns, don't allow her to go out again, and send for me immediately. If the woman who carried her off ventures to show her face, it is the commissary of police you must go for. Do you understand?"

"Yes, signor."

Fréneuse and the notary were already on the stairs. "Go, my children," growled Binos, "go and consult your philistine. There is nobody but my friend Piédouche who can disentangle this skein, and when once I have him—" And following Fréneuse's advice, he went straight to the Grand

Bock smoking-room, where he hoped at last to find the man whose skill was equal to anything, and send him off in pursuit of the missing Pia. Piédouche, who in less than an hour had discovered Bianca's domicile, would also devise the means of reaching her sister's hiding-place. To discover and deliver her was now the question before all others. The pursuit of her sister's murderers had become a secondary consideration. So Binos arrived in breathless haste and full of illusions at the Grand Bock, where he only found the landlord seated mournfully at his counter. Upon inquiry he learned that Piédouche had ceased to appear there. Father Poivreau, glad of an opportunity to vent his grief, related indeed that for several days his customers had deserted him ; the billiard table was unpatronised and the café empty ; even the retired druggist Pigache, the most faithful of his *habitues*, came no more. It was whispered that a detective frequented the place, and his gentlemen, who had no liking for the police, had gone to drink and play elsewhere. No one could say who this detective was, but it was affirmed that he came every day, and had concealed his true character very cleverly, the result being that everybody was suspected, especially such peaceable citizens as did not consort with the Don Juans who made the Grand Bock their rendezvous. They suspected the marble merchant ; they suspected the druggist ; they suspected even Piédouche ; and these worthy men, the landlord concluded, having got wind of the reports in circulation, no doubt stayed at home for fear of being insulted. Meanwhile the unhappy Poivreau, abandoned of all his customers, had ruin staring him in the face. "When I think that even you have been accused," he cried, rapping Binos on the shoulder. "Ah ! if I knew the scamp who invented these stories to injure me, it would give me satisfaction to murder him."

Binos was little moved by the misfortunes confided to him, and in his opinion the *habitues* were not far wrong, for he had always been satisfied that Piédouche belonged, or had belonged, to the police ; but the vexatious point of the affair was that Piédouche, warned of these reports, would not return. Where should he find him now ? Binos bitterly regretted that he had not insisted upon knowing where he lived, and saw no means of procuring his address but by asking for it at the Prefecture, and he doubted whether the officials would give it to him. As nothing more was to be done at the smoking-room, he took his leave after begging Poivreau to tell Piédouche, if by chance he should appear, that his friend Binos wished to see him as soon as possible, and was expecting him every day in the Rue Myrrha.

But he relied very little on the visit, and decided to go at once to Sophie Cornu's, tell her of Pia's disappearance, and try to obtain some useful suggestions from her. He was pensively crossing the Boulevard Rochechouart, and had already passed the Elysée Montmartre, when he espied the ex-druggist Pigache, whose absence Père Poivreau had been deplored, seated on a bench and talking to two ill-looking fellows. The idea at once occurred to Binos to approach the old druggist and ask him for news of Piédouche.

X.

PIGACHE had his back turned towards Binos, and did not see him. "Who the deuce is he talking with ?" Binos asked himself, as he eyed the two men. For a retired merchant, Pigache had dubious looking acquaintances.

The men in question were meanly clad and spoke standing, while Pigache, seated on the bench, had the appearance of giving them orders. He remarked that the two ill-clad fellows seemed to observe him and warn Father Pigache of his approach, for the old man suddenly turned his head, and, recognising Binos, favoured him with an engaging smile. The two men then bowed and moved off towards the Place Pigalle. "Good!" thought Binos, "now I shall have an opportunity of asking the old boy if he has seen Piédouche. I shall have to shout, but that doesn't matter. No one is passing, and I have no secrets to confide."

"Good day, dear Monsieur Binos," said the retired druggist. "I am glad to meet you. I haven't seen you for a century."

"I, too, am glad, papa, for I've just come from the Grand Bock and have something to ask you," shouted Binos. "How is it you have left Father Poivreau? I have just come from his *caboulot*, where I found him *tête-à-tête* with a bottle of absinthe. He was about emptying it to console himself for your loss."

"Well, dear me! I'll tell you. Poivreau does well enough, but he receives a sorry set. Between ourselves, the company doesn't suit me. I went there on your account and Monsieur Piélouche's, but he has deserted for some days, and I fancy you've a mind to do the same."

"I? that will depend; and as for Piédouche, I am looking everywhere for him to bring him back."

"Really? You don't know, then, where he lives?"

"No. And you?"

"No, I've never been to see him, except at the smoking-room, and he didn't talk much with me, because—you understand—it's not amusing to talk with a deaf man."

"You needn't say that to me, animal!" growled Binos.

"It appears you are of the same opinion," said Pigache, with a smile.

"You see I am not since I stop expressly to talk to you," shouted Binos.

"You are very amiable to say that, but it's not agreeable to you, since you call me an animal."

"What! you heard?"

"Yes; that wouldn't surprise you if you were accustomed to deaf people. If you were, you would know that they are not so deaf in the open air as between four walls, and that in a vehicle they can hear everything."

"Good! the first time I have anything to tell you I will take a cab and we will have a drive—only you will pay for it."

"Oh, with pleasure. But meanwhile we may talk a little here. This is one of my good days, because the weather is dry, and you needn't scream yourself hoarse."

"That's capital, for I don't wan't to stir up all the passers-by. I asked if you could give me any news of Piédouche. You have not his address, but you may have seen him somewhere."

"No, if I had seen him in the street I should have stopped him. I've a notion he doesn't live in this neighbourhood."

"Bah! his roost can't be far off. I would bet my best pipe on it."

"You want him for something special, then. I wager I can guess what."

"Ah, I defy you, papa."

"Indeed! Well now, you want the gilt pin you lent him the other day."

"The pin!" exclaimed Binos. "What! you saw—"

"The deaf see everything. It's plain enough why—they have no distractions."

" You didn't hear, then, what I said to him."

" As to that, no. The room has a low ceiling, and you see it is the outdoor air that opens our ears. But sometimes we guess a little by gestures, the motion of lips, and the expression on a face."

" And did you guess what Piédouche and I were talking about?"

" Oh, I couldn't declare that I guessed. I had an idea, but I might have been mistaken. I fancied you told him somebody had been killed or wounded with the pin, and he promised to have it examined to see if it were poisoned."

" You discovered that? Ah, truly, that's most extraordinary!"

" On the contrary, it is very easily explained. I wanted to touch it, and you stopped me. I immediately thought that you were afraid of an accident. As for the torn letter, I concluded you found it with the pin."

" Upon my word, Father Pigache, I begin to believe you are a sorcerer! And I have been taking you for a simpleton!"

" Bah! say an imbecile, at once; it would express your meaning better."

" Possibly," replied Binos, " but I here declare my mistake. A man who can understand without hearing, is capable of anything."

" You are very kind. It was true, then; the pin was used to commit a downright crime?"

" A young girl was murdered in an omnibus with it."

" The Place Pigalle omnibus, perhaps? I read something of that sort in the *Petit Journal*."

" Exactly; and my friend Freneuse and I have been looking for the knaves ever since. Freneuse was in the omnibus and saw them. Unfortunately he believed the death a natural one and thought no more about it. I, on the contrary, made my report to Piédouche, but we are still at the same point; and, meanwhile, the rascals continue their operations. They have just gone off with the girl's sister, and unless we succeed in finding them, will play her some knavish trick."

" Why, what have they against these children?"

" It would take too long to explain, and would not interest you. It is something about an inheritance. A Frenchman, who was their natural father, left them a fortune."

" And his relatives hired rascals to put them out of the way?"

" It is possible—but no—the deceased only had a step-brother, Monsieur Paulet, who is very rich, and wouldn't undertake such business as that."

" Nobody can tell. A man will do a great many things for money. You say his name is Paulet. In your place, I should look in that direction—you must know his address."

" No, but Freneuse does; and I remember now something that was said this morning. Monsieur Paulet formerly employed a business agent, who, it is likely enough, was the accomplice of the woman with the pin. At least, Freneuse saw them together at the theatre a day or two after the crime. But he does not know his name."

" He has only to ask Monsieur Paulet for it."

" He is going to do so to-day. I was on my way to the Rue des Abbesses when I met you, to see the landlady of the deceased girl, and I intended afterwards to go and find out what Freneuse has learned."

" Shall we go together?"

" What! Father Pigache! You propose to take a hand in this! That's something new. It might amuse you, perhaps, but I don't see how you can help me."

"You have just said I could do anything," replied the old man, smiling. "Well, try me. You will find the deaf can make themselves useful : first, because no one suspects them. And what do you risk? Only my finding out where this agent lives. I will have a talk with him."

"Dash it all!" exclaimed Binos, "I do not see why I shouldn't make use of you if only for the oddity of the thing. Freneuse will make fun of me, but that's nothing ; and I have a right to search on my own account while he is searching on his, and you will be as sharp as his notary."

"Ah! There is a notary, then?"

"Yes, a provincial notary who knows all about the will, and an honest man too. But for him we should never have known of the other daughter, and he is engaged in trying to find her. He is at this very moment, perhaps, at Monsieur Paulet's, where he went to get the agent's address."

"But will Monsieur Paulet give it to him?"

"And you think if he refuses it to him he will give it to you?"

"Perhaps. There is no harm in trying."

"No, and I am curious to know how you will set about it. I don't know exactly where he lives, but Freneuse will tell us. The Place Pigalle is not far. Come, papa."

Pigache was already starting. He had risen with youthful agility, and Binos was astonished by the sudden change which seemed to have been wrought in the manner and even the person of the retired druggist. His bent figure had suddenly become erect, his face wore an intelligent expression, and his little eyes sparkled brightly. "Pigache, my friend, I shouldn't know you," cried Binos. "If our friend Piédouche met you he would take you for somebody else, and I, for my part, should never have believed—if I hadn't seen you—that fresh air could change deaf people like that."

"You will see stranger things yet," said Pigache, smiling; "but let us lose no time. Monsieur Paulet lives a long way off, and who knows where he will send us after his agent. We must take a cab, for—"

"Look! your friends are following you," interrupted Binos, pointing to the two men whom his arrival had put to flight.

"Don't disturb yourself on their account. The poor creatures used to work for me when I was in business, and never meet me without stopping to say a few words and ask after my health."

"Why did they disappear when I came?"

"Oh, because they were ashamed of their shabby clothes."

"Then I am in the latest fashion? They find me very elegant? I am flattered!"

These and other insignificant remarks enlivened the walk as far as the Place Pigalle. Father Pigache became more and more active, and walked so briskly that Binos only kept pace with him with difficulty. Just as they reached the artist's house, a cab stopped at the door, from which two gentlemen alighted.

"Good!" exclaimed Binos; "here come Freneuse and the notary. The dunces! they have long faces. What if they have learned that Pia has already been dispatched like her sister!"

"Ask your friend," said Pigache, "while I speak with the notary."

Binos accordingly drew Freneuse aside, while the old man, with his hat in his hand, accosted M. Drugeon, who evinced no surprise on seeing him, and, in fact, it might have been inferred they were acquaintances. "Well," began Binos, "have you the address?"

"No," replied Freneuse, in a tone of ill-humour. "Monsieur Paulet as-

serts that he does not remember it. There is nothing left but to go to this lodging house keeper in the Rue des Abbesses. She can tell us where the woman of the omnibus lives. What have you done, on your side? Nothing, I warrant. Your man of the smoking-room was trifling with you."

"I have not seen him, but I have recruited an intelligent auxiliary."

"The little old man talking to Monsieur Drugeon?"

"Yes; he hasn't a very shrewd look, but I believe he is shrewd all the same."

Freneuse was about to make a rejoinder, when his eye fell upon a very fat woman coming towards them, balancing herself on her hips like a ship rocked by the waves. "This is the orange-woman," he muttered, "if I am not mistaken."

"You don't remember me," she said; "and it's not to be wondered at, as I'm not selling oranges. But I recognised you instantly, and I take the liberty of speaking, because I can tell you now where the girl in the omnibus lived."

"I know it, too," said Freneuse.

"In the Rue des Abbesses, eh? at Sophie Cornu's? So you knew it before? But that's not everything; I've found the woman too, that sat in the omnibus beside the girl—the one that went out of the theatre at the same time as you, and took the arm of the man who rode outside. And you have never guessed who she was?"

"No; but if you could tell me anything about her you would render me a great service."

"She is a fortune-teller, Madame Stella, Rue de la Sourdière. Sophie Cornu consults her. I saw them talking together yesterday on the Boulevard Rochechouart, and as I have known Sophie a long time I stopped to speak to her. The other offered to tell my fortune and gave me her address."

"You didn't allude to the affair of the omnibus?"

"Why, no; there would have been no end of explanations then. But I promised to consult her."

"May I accompany you?" asked Freneuse, quickly.

"If you like to, though I don't believe much in this foolery. But I am not rich, you know—"

"Oh, I will pay for the consultation."

"That will suit me. Tell me your day and hour."

"Now. I will take you in a cab."

"That's better still. I have nothing to do till this evening. I only sell outside theatres of an evening."

"Wait, then, five minutes, while I speak to the gentleman yonder."

"The one with the white cravat? He looks like a magistrate."

"Come," said Freneuse, making a sign to Binos, "talk to madame while I speak with Monsieur Drugeon."

"Just so, good mother," began Binos, while his friend approached the notary, who was engaged in an animated conversation with Father Pigache; "so you are acquainted with this good Sophie?"

"Everybody knows her in the neighbourhood. You see I live at the corner of the Rue Muller."

"And I in the Rue Myrrha. We are neighbours, and when you want your portrait done—"

"You are a photographer, then?"

"Never, I am a painter—not a house painter mind."

"Artist, then that's better. Your friend is an artist, too, eh?"

"Artist number one. He makes money as fast as you do ; and, not to flatter you, you look rather flourishing."

"Well, yes, I do pretty well. I say, might I ask you what your friend wants to consult the sorceress for ?"

"To know what the girl in the omnibus died of."

"Ha ! ha ! that's a droll idea. I wanted to ask for something to cure my man, who's been in bed for a month. Ah ! your friend there has been talking to the old fellows."

"He is coming for us, mother."

Freneuse approached with an animated face and gleaming eyes. Binos was astonished by the sudden transformation. "He looks as well pleased as if he had found Pia," he thought.

"My good woman," said Freneuse, "these gentleman would like to see you."

"What do they want with me ?"

"Some information—they will tell you."

As the portly dame set out on her march, Binos muttered to himself : "If I understand what all this means, I wish I may be stuck on the nose with the pin I confided to Piédochue."

"You will understand," said Freneuse who overheard him. "Do me the favour to go for a cab."

"And the one you have kept ? Ah, Father Pigache and the notary are lifting the fat woman into it and getting in after her—Pigache going off with his two friends by the same trap too, one outside, the other inside. Where the deuce are they going ?"

"You will see, for we are to follow them."

XI.

SUCH inhabitants of the Rue de la Sourdière as were that day lounging on their doorsteps witnessed an unaccustomed sight. Two cabs, following each other closely, stopped at the corner of the Rue Gomboust. Four men and a woman alighted from the first, and the party separated into three groups. At the same moment two men sprang from the second vehicle and directed their steps toward the Saint-Honoré Market. The woman from the first vehicle then walked up the Rue de la Sourdière, while a little old man followed a few steps in her rear. Two ill-clad loafers who came behind took the same route as the pair who had turned towards the Saint-Honoré Market. An observer might have divined that these people all formed part of the same expedition, but the tradespeople who noticed them were not suspicious. The woman entered a handsome house and spoke to the *concierge*. The little old man who followed her came up before the end of the colloquy, and as both asked for the same person, they both received the same reply.

"The first floor, the door to the left. But I am not sure that madame is receiving. She is about to set off on a journey."

They ascended the stairs without exchanging a word, but when they reached the landing their attitude changed. "You understand what you are to say ?" asked the old man in an undertone. "You are the sister of my housekeeper. I have tried everything to cure my deafness. You spoke to me about Madame Stella, who gave consultations on all maladies, and you have brought me to have her prescribe a remedy."

"Exactly," replied the woman.

"And when you have introduced me, let me talk."

"That suits me, for I shouldn't know what to say."

"Here is the door," resumed the man, pointing to the plate on which shone the name of Madame Lenormand's pupil. "Ring, my good woman."

While the old woman was pulling the brass knob, the man remarked the inscription on the opposite door. "Ah," he murmured, "here is a business agent; this is the partner, I warrant. I've a notion I shall make a double hit."

"No one answers," said the woman.

"Ring louder."

The second effort had no greater success. "The *habitués* must have a way of making themselves known," muttered the old man. "The question is, to find it. Ring again, and we will see."

The third peal was also without effect. Nothing stirred inside the apartment of the fortune-teller, but the man who was only deaf indoors fancied he could hear someone moving in the rooms of the agent, and he was about to press his ear against Blanchelaine's door when it partly opened. "Monsieur Piédouche!" he exclaimed. And at the same time he advanced his head and arm through the opening.

"What! is it you Father Pigache?" said the man who had opened.

"Ah! I am delighted to see you. I had heaps of things to tell you. Such strange things have happened at the Grand Bock since you stopped coming there. I little expected to find you here. I came with my servant to consult Madame Stella."

"She isn't here," shouted Piédouche, making a trumpet of his two hands.

"Ah! I am very sorry. I was told she could give me a remedy that would relieve my infirmity. I will come another day—but, since I have found you, I can talk with you a little."

"I haven't time."

"Oh, I won't be long. You can give me five minutes."

"What have you to say to me?"

"Things that will interest you. Only think! for two days Father Poivreau's café has been full of spies."

Piédouche still held the door half open, and seemed unwilling to give passage to Father Pigache. He looked at him with a suspicious air, at the same time eyeing the fat orange-woman, who witnessed their interview. But at the word "spies," his attitude changed. "What is taking place at the Grand Bock?" he shouted.

"It seems there's a search going on for somebody who was mixed up with a murder and has frequented the smoking-room under a false name. I can give you all the particulars, but it would be troublesome, perhaps, because you are not at home, I see"—pointing to the plate, on which was inscribed the name of Blanchelaine.

"I am at the house of a friend, who has asked me to fill his place for an hour."

"Then I sha'n't disturb you, and we can talk. I will tell my servant to wait for me in the street. We can't talk here, for you are obliged to bellow, and we should attract the attention of all the neighbours. Go, Virginie; if it tires you to stand there you can take a seat near the ornamental water in the Tuilleries garden. I will join you presently."

He correctly anticipated that the orange-woman would understand him, and not move so far.

"Come in, my friend," said Piédouche.

He locked the door as Pigache passed inside, and shewed him to his private room, where a woman was moving to and fro. Fréneuse would easily have recognised her had he been present, for she was dressed precisely as on the evening of the "Chevaliers du Brouillard." She frowned at sight of the old man whom her accomplice had ushered in, and her eyes asked who he was. "Don't be uneasy," said Piédouche, in an undertone. "I want to pump the fool, and if I find he's a spy, he won't get out of here alive." As he spoke, Piédouche watched Pigache out of the corner of his eye, but the old man did not wince. His face was as smiling and simple as ever. "Good! I am satisfied," resumed the agent. "I feared his deafness was feigned. We need not hesitate to talk as though we were alone."

"But who is this man, and what is he here for?"

"He is a simpleton who frequents the Grand Bock, and he didn't come to see me. His servant brought him to consult you about his deafness."

"It was he, then, that rang?"

"No, it was his servant; and when I half opened my door I found him under my nose."

"But what did you bring him in for?"

"Because he said he had seen detectives at Father Poivreau's, and I want to find out what is going on."

"Make haste, then; I don't want to leave the girl alone. She talks of going this evening, and I was obliged to quiet her with a promise to go to Sophie Cornu's for her sister's trunk."

During these explanations, Pigache stood contemplating the lady and prepared to make his bow to her. "Madame is the wife of my friend who left me in charge of his office," cried Piédouche.

"My best compliments to your friend," said Pigache, bowing down to the ground.

"Sit down now and tell me your story. So the police are looking for a murderer at Father Poivreau's?"

"Yes; and to my thinking they'll not find him, for nobody comes now. The customers are all frightened, you see, and won't set foot at the Grand Bock."

"Who has been murdered? The papers have spoken of no crime recently."

"They say it is an odd affair—a young girl who was killed in an omnibus."

This reply, made in the most natural and careless tone, disconcerted the sorceress and her accomplice, who little expected to hear Bianca's death spoken of as a recognised murder, and nearly aroused a feeling of suspicion. They exchanged glances, and the woman made a motion as if to leave the room. "How do you know that?" asked Piédouche, without raising his voice.

"What is the name of the murderer?" said Pigache, making an acoustic horn with his hand. "I know nothing about that; any of Father Poivreau's customers might be suspected, especially those who never come now. But I can tell you the animal that has caused all this—that scapegrace Binos. It seems he has carried a complaint to the Prefecture."

"I am not surprised," growled Piédouche, addressing his female companion. "The dunce probably tells the truth, and it's plain he doesn't hear."

"Yes, but this news is serious. I am inclined to think Binos has denounced you. You were wrong to talk with him about it."

"It was necessary to get him to produce the pin and letter; but, perhaps, not seeing me at the café any more, he began to suspect me, and his friend, Fréneuse, no doubt urged him on. He has seen us, and if Monsieur Paulet gave him the address of Monsieur Blanchelaine, the case is a serious one."

"That is to say we may sleep in prison this very night. I have a mind to set off with Pia this evening."

"But you said she was bent upon getting her sister's trunk?"

"If that were all, I could get the trunk without her. But she wants to go to the Saint-Ouen cemetery."

"And she will then consent to go?"

"Yes, that is all she wants."

"Well, take her to Sophie Cornu's and to Saint-Ouen. There will still be time to take the express train at eight. The sooner you go the better, for these painters will find out that the girl is not at Lorenzo's, and might institute a search for her. We are at the mercy of a chance—of a chance meeting."

"Oh, I will be careful to lower the blinds of the cab—and they are surely not looking for her yet."

"No, but they will be, perhaps to-morrow. You must set off this evening for Marseilles, and I will join you on the day after to-morrow."

"I believe you are right. I will send the little negress for a cab."

"Very well. Wait till I get rid of this old beast, who has just rendered us a famous service." And turning to the old man he shouted: "Excuse me, Father Pigache, madame tells me she has heard about this story of the omnibus. For my part, I don't think there is anything in it, and I will try to reassure poor old Poivreau. Will you wait for me at the Grand Bock? I shall be there in an hour."

"With great pleasure. You are like me, you don't abandon old friends because they are in trouble. But I won't disturb you any longer, and present you and madame with my humble compliments. I will return to-morrow to consult your neighbour, Madame Stella," added Pigache as he withdrew.

Piédoch showed him to the door and bade him adieu with a hearty grip of the hand. As soon as Pigache found himself outside, he descended the stairs four at a time, and hastened towards the Rue Gomboust, where the two cabs were waiting.

XII.

STELLA, as a sorceress, was accustomed to be well served, and had not to wait long for the return of her sable messenger. The nearest cab-stand was a considerable distance off, but the little negress had the good fortune to come upon an empty cab which was moving slowly along the peaceable Rue de la Sourdière. Pia had but one costume, and she lost no time in preparations. She gladly accepted the proposal to go at once to the Rue des Abbesses and the cemetery, so that they might take the evening train. When they reached the entrance of the house, Stella passed before her and glanced rapidly at both sides of the street. There was nothing to excite suspicion. The cab-driver had left his box to speak with some one, a comrade on temporary leave as indicated by his costume.

"It is you who were brought by my servant, a little negress ?"

"Yes, madame. Will madame get in?" said the driver, opening the door.

"I take you by the hour, and there will be a gratuity if you drive well."

"Oh, madame will be satisfied—where to?"

"Rue des Abbesses, Montmartre, turn to the left at the top of the Rue des Martyrs. I will stop you when you reach the house."

"If madame will allow me, I will give a lift to my friend here, who lives on the Place de la Mairie, a few steps from where we are going."

"As you please," replied Mademoiselle Lenormand's pupil, and she hurried Pia inside, followed her, and lowered the blinds. "You wish to avoid being seen, my dear child, do you not?" she asked.

"Yes, madame, you know that," murmured the girl.

"It is a very necessary precaution, as we must pass through the artists' quarter to get to Sophie's."

"But it doesn't matter, as I am very well hidden; besides, no one is thinking about me."

Stella had reasons for believing the contrary, but she kept them to herself, and they rode on in silence. Pia was sad and dejected. She allowed herself to be led about like a criminal going to execution, and her companion made no attempt to draw her out of this lethargy, which spared her the necessity of replying to embarrassing questions. "All is progressing well," she said to herself. "Sophie Cornu has been warned of our visit, and the trunk will have no doubt been brought down into the alley, so we shall not be detained there more than five minutes. At the cemetery, it would be uncommon ill luck should we meet with any acquaintances. This evening at eight we shall be on our way to Marseilles."

The cab travelled with exceptional speed, and the fortune-teller was congratulating herself upon her good luck. The vehicle went at a trot up the hill leading to the exterior boulevard, and then started off at a still more rapid rate. Stella had so carefully protected herself from the observation of passers-by, that she did not at first perceive the direction the cab was taking; but on raising a corner of the blind, she suddenly saw that the driver, instead of going towards the Rue des Abbesses, had turned to the left. She rapped on the window to notify him of his error; she rang—but to no purpose. The coachman, to all appearance, was as deaf as Father Pigache, for he continued his course till he reached the Place Pigalle. Astounded and furious, Stella lost all self-command, and suddenly lowered one of the glasses. But ranged in a semi-circle on the sidewalk where the intractable cab had stopped, there stood a number of people who appeared to be awaiting it; and she understood the meaning at once—for she recognised Freneuse and Binos. Then she thought only of flight. She opened the door but fell, as she sprang out, into the arms of the cabman's friend who had descended from the box to receive her. She tried to escape from him, but he lifted her and carried her into the house—into the porter's room, which was occupied by two policemen. It was so quickly done that she had scarcely time to cry out, and was taken by passers-by for a woman who had fainted. Pia, absorbed in sorrowful reverie, was oblivious to all that had passed, till the door on the other side opened and Paul Freneuse appeared. "Ah!" she murmured, retreating quickly; "this woman deceived me. She was bringing me to you—leave me!"

"That woman!" exclaimed Freneuse, "she is your sister's murderer, who would have killed you also if we had not succeeded in delivering you

from her. I cannot explain things now. But Binos will take you to the studio, where I will join you in an instant."

"To the studio! never!" said Pia in a choking voice.

"Good! I can guess," cried Binos. "She is afraid of meeting Mademoiselle Paulet. Well, little one, I swear that she will never set foot here again, and that if her respectable father presents himself I will see that he is put out. Ask Freneuse."

"I, too, swear it," said Freneuse—and his eyes so plainly said that he spoke the truth, that Pia, pale and trembling, took the hand which Binos had offered to assist her in alighting, and led her into the house.

"And now for Madame Piédoch ! " muttered Freneuse.

"Ah! the wretch!" cried the orange-woman. "She declares to my face that she wasn't in the omnibus."

"Oh, she will find it useless to deny," said M. Drugeon. "But will her accomplice be captured?"

"He must be already locked up," said the man on the box. "The governor has that matter in charge, and he will be here in ten minutes. What do you think of the way he has managed this business?"

"It is astonishing. That idea of disguising you two as cab-drivers was admirable."

"The real ones made a queer face when we asked them to change their clothes for ours. But the sorceress was nicely outwitted."

Freneuse and Virginie Pilon left M. Drugeon to sound the praises of the false Pigache—who was simply a functionary of the detective police—and went to the concierge's room, where Stella was confined, like a wild beast caught in a trap. She disdained to reply to any of the questions which Freneuse put to her, and he had just returned for Pia, when Pigache arrived, having terminated his enterprise in the Rue de la Sourdière. Auguste Piédoch, *alias* Blanchelaine, had been arrested on leaving the house, and was now on his way to the Prefecture.

The entry of Pigache into the concierge's room occasioned a sensation. Stella saw that she was lost; the pretended deaf man had heard her conversation with her partner, and was fully acquainted with the guilt of both of them. "Where is the pin with which you murdered Bianca Astrodi?" he asked abruptly. "You have it with you, and if you do not deliver it up, madame there, who was beside you in the omnibus, will search your person."

"It is useless," she said, in a hoarse voice; "here it is." As she spoke she closed her hand over it quickly, and the murderous point entered her wrist. Bianca was avenged.

"She has spared the Court of Assizes its work," said Pigache philosophically, while the police raised the corpse. "I wager this fellow Piédoch won't have the courage to do as much. It is true he has a chance of escape. Now that his gentle companion is removed, the complicity will be difficult to prove. I shall preserve the pin, however, for without it a jury would not condemn him."

The orange-woman had fled on seeing the sorceress fall. In the corridor she came in collision with M. Drugeon, engaged in conversation with a person whose presence there was little looked for. From a cab, driven this time by a real cab-driver, M. and Mademoiselle Paulet had alighted, to the astonishment of the notary, who was promenading on the sidewalk—for M. Paulet had an hour before refused to give the address of his business agent, and they had parted coldly. Why, then, knowing that Freneuse

had been acting in concert with M. Drugeon, had he now come to the artist's studio? "I know the name," he said, as he alighted. "It is Blanchelaine, and he lives in the Rue de la Sourdière."

"You tell me nothing new," said the notary. "He is arrested."

"Arrested! Ah, good Heavens! it was true, then—he has been implicated in a crime. You will bear witness that I brought Monsieur Freneuse his address as soon as I had it. I found it among my papers ten minutes after he left."

Reflection had determined M. Paulet to take precautions to shield himself from a suspicion of being the instigator of a crime, but he was still far from reassured when he thought of his letters, and the engagement he had signed, and which must have been seized at Blanchelaine's house.

"Let us go in, papa," said Mademoiselle Marguerite, haughtier and more beautiful than ever. "Monsieur Freneuse will explain to us what is passing here."

"I warn you that you will not find him alone," said M. Drugeon.

"That is all the more reason for going in. We shall be fully enlightened."

"Don't look in the concierge's room," called out Virginie Pilon.

The precaution was needless. Father and daughter were equally impatient to reach the studio. Through the open door they witnessed an unexpected *tableau*. Pia was seated where Mademoiselle Paulet had seen her before, but Pia had ceased to weep. She was listening, enraptured, to the vows of Paul, as he covered the hand she abandoned to him with kisses. And Binos, still facetious, raised his arms over them, as if giving them his blessing. He was the first to perceive M. Paulet and his daughter standing on the threshold, and had the impudence to cry out: "Isn't it touching?—Daphne and Chloe!"

Freneuse rose quickly and advanced towards them. Pia waited, pale and anxious. It was her destiny that was about to be decided.

"Come, papa," said Marguerite drily, "my place is not here, since monsieur receives a creature who has stolen your inheritance from you."

"You insult a child who is your superior," said Freneuse carried away by anger. "Leave us! And you, monsieur, learn that Mademoiselle Astrodi relinquishes the inheritance you covet. She does not desire the fortune of a man who abandoned her mother. I hope justice will not call upon you to render an account of your dealings with a villain, and I wish never to see you any more." Thus Pia also was avenged.

Three months have elapsed. Blanchelaine, *alias* Piédouche, will appear before the next assizes. Pigache has been promoted, and will perhaps become chief of police. M. Drugeon has returned home, laden with the blessings of Freneuse and Pia, who have gone to Italy. They were married at Subiaco, and have no need of M. François Boyer's fortune to be happy. Freneuse missed the fine art show this year, but his happiness has made ample amends for the sacrifice. Binos consoles himself by drinking bocks, in the absence of his friends. M. Paulet has not been molested, and his daughter will have half a million the more. But no one asks for her hand, for all Paris is acquainted with the Crime of the Omnibus.

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